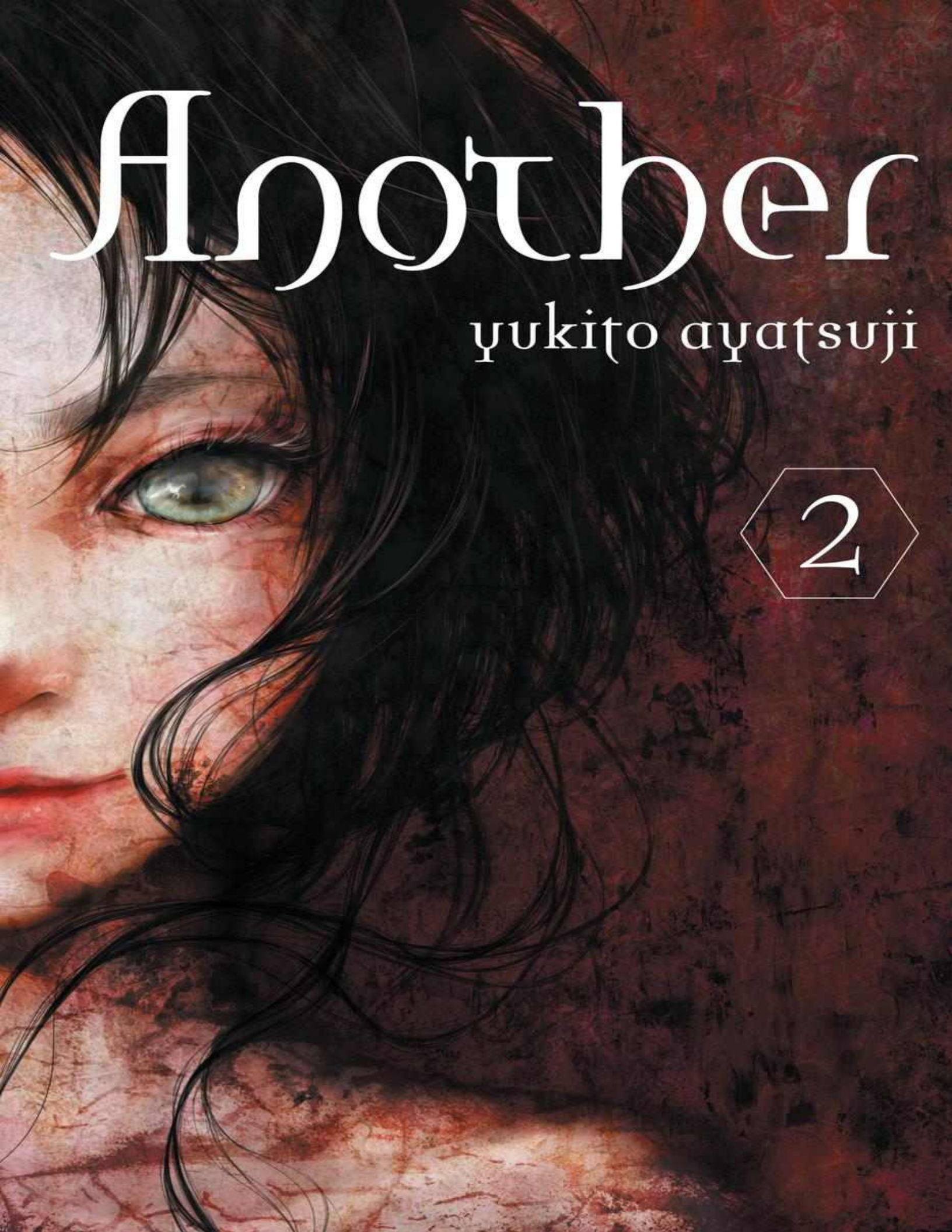
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Volume 2

Yukito Ayatsuji

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Part 2

How?……Who?

Chapter 10

June V

1

The next day began a peculiar lifestyle at North Yomi.

It was unpleasant at first, obviously. I knew the answer to *How could they?* but only felt all the more out of place and rebellious. Intellectually, it was understandable, but emotionally I couldn't accept it.

Every single person in the class, including the teachers, treated Mei and me as if we didn't exist. In response, Mei and I acted as if every single person except the two of us wasn't there. What a twisted, unnatural situation.

Still, no matter how warped or unnatural, gradually people get used to the situation they find themselves in. Since the rules were crystal clear, I would even say it was a couple steps up from how terrible I'd felt at my last school. As day after day went by, I started to see that things really might not be that bad, and that idea started to win out.

It's not so bad... I mean, compared to the unsettled situation of only a few days ago when the "what?" and the "why?" had been obscure, this was way better. And on a totally different level, I'd say, yeah, it probably was way better.

The solitude of Mei Misaki and me, alone out of the entire class.

In other words, it's equivalent to freedom for me and Mei, alone out of the entire class.

Like maybe...I would entertain slightly childish fantasies at times.

Now no matter how Mei and I behaved in the classroom of third-year Class 3, no matter what we talked about, no one would be able to say a word about it. They all had to pretend that they saw nothing and heard nothing.

Even if Mei dyed her hair some crazy color. Even if I suddenly busted out singing in the middle of a class, or did a handstand on top of my desk. Even if we started loudly discussing plans to rob a bank. Even then, everyone would most likely continue pretending that they couldn't see or hear us. Not even if we were to embrace like lovers in the middle of the room.

Hold it right there, Koichi.

Better put the brakes on run-of-the-mill fantasies like that, given the present circumstances. Got that, kid?

Anyway…

In a certain sense, this offered an incredibly peaceful, low-key environment that I never could have achieved in an ordinary school setting.

I interpreted the situation that way, too.

And yet behind the calm and the tranquility, of course, tension and wariness lingered; anxiety and fear; dread, inescapable, brought about by constantly wondering whether the "disasters" for this year were going to keep happening.

So it had gone for a little over a week after this phase of our lives

had begun. Even when June was half over, there had been no new incidents.

I think the number of times Mei stayed home from school and skipped classes during this period dropped considerably.

On the other hand, it went up for me. No question about it.

But though the issue would normally have been cause to alarm an educator, the head teacher, Mr. Kubodera, never reprimanded me for it. And no way could he inform my grandparents, who were my guardians here in Yomiyama. According to Mei, when there were parent-teacher conferences for high school placement counseling, or whatever else, they arranged for a different teacher to sit in on the meeting for the student who was "not there."

From time to time, the assistant teacher, Ms. Mikami, acted deeply agonized, too. I would be lying if I said that didn't bother me. But…I couldn't exactly voice my complaints to her. I really don't think I could have.

I was following along fine in class. The teachers would most likely massage my attendance record, and if I could knock out the exams, what was the problem? Barring anything crazy happening, getting into high school was going to be a breeze thanks to my dad's connections, so…

These little rebellions had been my only option. And the thought rose all on its own, *Nothing wrong with that, is there?*

Mei and I, the two “non-existers,” would often go up to the roof of Building C on days when it wasn’t raining. We ate lunch together up there sometimes, too.

I had my grandmother’s homemade lunch, as usual. Mei would typically nibble on some bread while drinking tea from a can.

“Kirika doesn’t make your lunches for you?”

“Sometimes. When she feels like it.”

Mei’s answer to my question was indifferent. Without any serious moaning or self-pity.

“Maybe once or twice a month. But to be honest, they taste awful.”

“Do you cook for yourself or anything?”

“Nope.”

And here again, the shake of her head was indifferent.

“I can heat up ready-made stuff, but that’s about it. Isn’t that what everyone does?”

“I’m good at cooking, actually.”

“You are?”

“I was in the culinary arts club at my last school.”

“…That’s different.”

Not something I wanted to hear from Mei.

“Then can you cook me something sometime?”

“Wh—? Uh, sure. One of these days,” I replied after a moment’s flustered hesitation. How far in the future would that day be? The thought, half-formed, occurred to me as I answered. “Speaking of, you used to be in the art club, right?”

“When I was in first year, yeah. I’ve known Mochizuki since back then.”

“What about now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you in the art club now?”

“There was no art club in second year. Or I guess I mean, they put the club on hiatus.”

“But it started back up this April, right?”

“Yeah, and I showed up a couple times in April. But once May started, that was it.”

Meaning she couldn’t go anymore because she’d become “not there.”

“Was Ms. Mikami the sponsor in your first year, too?”

There was a slight pause during which Mei glanced at my face before replying, “Ms. Mikami was **too**, yeah. There was another art teacher who was the main sponsor. But in our second year, that teacher transferred to another school, so…”

So then the club had gone on hiatus for a year until Ms. Mikami

had made up her mind to take on sole sponsorship of the club, huh? I see.

"That reminds me. You were drawing a picture up here once, remember? The first time we met up here, you had a sketchbook with you."

"Did I?"

"I saw you with the same sketchbook in the secondary library, too. Did you finish the picture you were drawing?"

"…For now."

She had been drawing a picture of a beautiful young girl with ball joints. I remembered how Mei had said, "I'm going to give this girl huge wings, last of all."

"Did you put the wings on yet?"

"…Yeah, sure." Mei's eyes lowered, hiding a shadow of sadness. "I'll let you see it one of these days."

"Okay."

One of these days, huh? How far in the future would that be?

As we progressed through this undeniably trivial conversation, I felt as if we spent a lot of time talking about me, though I wasn't fielding an unusual number of questions. I talked about my dad being in India. About my dead mother. About my life before I came to Yomiyama and about my life after. About my grandparents. About Reiko. About my collapsed lung and being hospitalized. About Ms. Mizuno…

But unless I asked Mei a specific question, she didn't make any effort to talk about herself. In fact, even when I did ask her something, most of the time she would resist answering or dance around the issue.

"What do you do for fun? Draw pictures?"

I even tried asking her questions formally like that.

"Actually, I like looking at pictures more than I like drawing them, I think."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Even then I only mean art books, really. We have a ton of them at my house."

"Have you ever been to an art exhibit?"

"Living in a rural town like this, you don't get a lot of opportunities for that."

She told me she preferred the Western art that predated Impressionism. And that she didn't actually care for pictures like the ones her mother, Kirika, painted.

"What about dolls?" I asked on an impulse. "What do you think of the dolls Kirika makes? Do you not really like those, either?"

"…Well, y'know." In a reflection of her words, an ambiguous cloud came over her expression. "I don't hate them. And there are some that I like, but…"

I decided not to push any further. In the most lighthearted tone I could manage, I said, "You should come visit me in Tokyo

sometime. We'll go visit the art museums. I'll show you around."

"Okay. Someday."

Someday…

Just how far in the future would that be from this moment? Again the thought rose in my mind half-formed.

3

"You want to go take a peek into the art club room?"

It was during lunch on Thursday, June 18, that Mei suggested this.

It had been pouring rain all day, so there was no way we could eat on the roof. Still, the two of us who were "not there" were reluctant to eat in the classroom like everyone else. When fourth period ended, it was as if we'd signaled to each other: we both immediately got up from our desks and left the classroom. That was when Mei made the suggestion.

I could think of less interesting places to go, so I quickly agreed. "Sure."

The art club room was on the first floor of Building Zero, all the way at the western end. Originally, the room had been a regular classroom. It had been divided in two and was now half as big and being used as the art club room. The next room over was the culture club room. There was a placard hanging on the door that said "Local

Historical Society."

"Oh!" someone cried out as soon as we went in.

There was already someone inside.

Two girls I'd never seen before. Judging by the colors of their name tags, one was a second-year and the other was a first-year. The second-year had a narrow, calm face and a ponytail, while the first-year had a major baby face and glasses with red frames.

"Misaki-senpai!" the second-year with the ponytail exclaimed. She blinked in wonder. "What are you…?"

"I felt like coming over," Mei replied with her usual dryness.

"Didn't you quit the club?"

"I'm just taking a break from it."

"Oh-h-h, really?"

This from the first-year with the glasses.

It seemed that these girls hadn't been let in on the special situation of third-year Class 3 (though since there was a rule that said "no telling anyone outside of class," that wasn't surprising). They began talking to Mei in a perfectly normal way, which was better proof than anything.

"Um, who's that?" the second-year asked, looking at me.

Mei quickly replied, "My classmate, Sakakibara. He's friends with Mochizuki, too."

"Oh-h-h, really?"

The first-year. Her reply was in exactly the same tone, as if she were replaying a default recording. Her expression was exactly the same, too, and she had kind of a bashful smile…Urk. This might not be so awesome for me.

"He said he's interested in the art club, so I brought him over," Mei said, offering just enough of an explanation.

"Oh-h-h, really?"

"Are you going to join?" the second-year asked, throwing me completely off-kilter.

"Uh, I wasn't going to…I mean, I dunno. I…"

As I struggled through my response, Mei slipped right past the two girls. I followed her lead and walked into the room.

It was kept much more neatly than I'd expected, somehow.

In the middle of the room were two big worktables exactly like the one in the art room. One wall had been made into lockers for the club members, and on the opposite wall were big steel shelves with art supplies and a bunch of other stuff neatly arranged on them.

"Mochizuki hasn't changed," Mei remarked, walking up to one of several easels that had been set up in the room. Looking at it, I saw a copy of Munch's *The Scream*—no, not an exact copy. The background details were probably pretty different from the original painting, and the man with his hands over his ears kind of looked like Mochizuki…

…And at precisely that moment, in walked Yuya Mochizuki himself.

“Oh, senpai.”

“Mochizuki-senpai!”

Hearing the two girls’ voices, I turned around, and there at the door was Mochizuki. The second he saw us, his face transformed, as if he’d just run smack into a ghost or something.

“Uh, c-could you two come with me for a second? Now?” he said to the girls, keeping his eyes off of us. “I need your help with something right away.”

“Oh-h-h, really?”

“But Misaki-senpai is actually here for once…”

“Just come with me.”

And so Mochizuki left the room, practically dragging the two girls with him.

Turning back to *The Pseudo Scream* on the easel, Mei let out a quiet snicker. It was infectious, and I stifled my own laughter.

It would be tough to treat us as if we were “not there” and ignore us with those two outsiders there, since they didn’t know what was going on (and of course he couldn’t explain that to them). That’s why he’d needed to get out of there any way he could. But what exactly was Mochizuki going to conjure up for those girls to help with “right away”? As my imagination worked it over, I started to feel sorry for him.

Mei moved away from *The Pseudo Scream* and toward the back of the room. She pulled something from the shadows of the lockers.

A white cloth had been wrapped around the entire thing, but the shape of it told me that this, too, was an easel. Mei gently pulled the cloth away. A French size-ten canvas sat on it backward. Mei gave a low sigh and then turned the canvas around to the front.

It was a half-finished oil painting. I didn't need to ask to know this had to belong to Mei…

The canvas showed a portrait of a woman dressed in black. Her features revealed at a glance that it was her mother…However.

Bizarrely, the face was being split in two. From the top of her head, through her forehead, eyebrows, nose, and mouth. Her entire face was being ripped open in a "V" shape. Such was the subject of this painting.

On the right half of the torn face I could discern a faint smile. And on the left, an expression of sorrow. The painting showed no blood and no subcutaneous structures, so it didn't seem graphic at all. But it was plenty grotesque, and in pretty terrible taste…

"At least they didn't throw it out, I guess," Mei murmured. "If someone like Akazawa were in the art club instead of Mochizuki…"

She might have destroyed it on the rationale that the painting of someone who's "not there" can't be allowed to exist. That's probably what Mei was implying.

"You're going to take it home?" I asked.

"…No." Mei gave a slight shake of her head and turned the canvas back around. She wrapped the cloth around the easel and returned it to the shadow of the lockers.

4

Right as we came out of the art club room and back into the hall, we ran into Ms. Mikami.

Naturally, we had to ignore her. And she had to ignore us. I understood that, but my steps stuttered to an inadvertent stop for just one moment.

Maybe that was why Ms. Mikami came to a stop, too, then turned her eyes away from us uncomfortably. I thought I saw her lips tremble as if to say something…But it might have been my imagination. It all happened in the brief span of a few seconds in the dimly lit hall, after all.

On Thursdays, fifth period (our next class) was art with Ms. Mikami, but we weren't planning to go. Due to the nature of the class, the teacher and the rest of the class obviously had it easier when the two "non-existers" were absent. Same with the extended homeroom in sixth period.

"What are we doing for next period?" I asked Mei in a low voice as we walked side by side down the hall.

"Let's go to the library," she answered. "The secondary library, obviously. We might as well eat lunch there, too."

5

Thus, when the bell to start fifth period rang, we were in the secondary library. When we arrived, there was no one else there and no sign of the librarian, Mr. Chibiki.

Mei sat down in one of the chairs that circled the large table and started reading a book she'd brought with her. I'd caught a glimpse of the title when she took it out of her bag: *The Lonely Crowd*. *What kind of book is that?* I wondered. It seemed completely alien to the genre Ms. Mizuno and I had specialized in, at least.

"I borrowed it from the main library," Mei said, her eyes cast down on the open book. "The title kind of spoke to me."

"*The Lonely Crowd*?"

"It's written by a man named Riesman. David Riesman. Heard of him?"

"Nope."

"It seems like something your dad would have in his library."

Ah. That kind of book, huh?

"Is it interesting?"

"Mrm…I guess."

I went over to stand before the same bookshelf Mr. Chibiki had pointed out to me the last time I'd been here, by myself. In exactly the same spot I remembered, I found the item I sought—the yearbook for 1972. I took it down from the shelf and went back to the big table.

I chose a spot two seats down from Mei and sat down, then

opened the yearbook. It wasn't because I wanted to see how my mother had looked in middle school again. I'd remembered something **I wanted to check.**

I found the page for third-year Class 3 and scrutinized the group photo on the left-hand page.

Fifth from the right in the second row was my mother as a third-year middle-schooler, smiling a little tensely. Diagonally in front of her—standing a slight distance from the rows of students, all the way to the right side—was a man. Wearing a pale blouson on his willowy frame. One hand resting on his hip, giving a cheerier smile than any of the students, it was…*Yeah, that's what I thought.*

"Which one's your mom?"

Mei's voice came from behind me, surprising me so badly I almost shouted. For crying out loud…We were barely three meters apart. How had I not noticed her standing up?

Getting my nerves under control, I pointed at the photo. "…Her."

"Hm-m-m."

Mei peered at the yearbook over my shoulder, staring intently at the image of my mother's face.

"Ritsuko, huh?" she murmured. "Hm-m-m…I can see it."

Finally she nodded, apparently satisfied. Then she pulled out the chair to my right, sat down on the edge of it, and asked me this: "What did your mom die from?"

"Oh…"

Unconsciously, I let out a sigh.

"She gave birth to me here, and then that summer—it was July. She wasn't doing too well afterward and she caught a cold that turned into something worse."

"…Oh."

That had been fifteen years ago. I guess more accurately, it had been fourteen years and eleven months ago, doing the math.

"Anyway, did you know this?"

I asked the question this time. I surreptitiously watched Mei's face in profile. I thought the eye patch over her left eye looked dirtier than usual today.

"Look at the head teacher for that year's third-year Class 3."

The man in the pale blouson on the right edge of the group photo.

"He comes off totally different now, huh?" Mei replied. "This is the first time I've ever seen a photo from back then."

Oh, yes. The head teacher for her class was a handsome young man…He taught social studies and supervised the theater club or something along those lines. He was quite the fired-up educator. I believe the students thought well of him.

Yeah, that's what my grandmother had said as she worked back through her memories of long ago. She'd been talking about the man in this picture.

Even if he was only in his mid-twenties twenty-six years ago, he would be over fifty now.

The ages matched up. But when I'd looked at this yearbook last time and **noticed him**, just like Mei I'd thought how much he'd changed in twenty-six years.

I checked the name of the teacher printed below the photo, just to be sure. And I was right. It said:

Mr. Tatsuji Chibiki

"Can I check something else?" I asked, lifting my eyes from the yearbook and turning them on Mei. "Last week at your house, when you explained all the stuff that's going on, you kept saying you heard it from '**someone**.' Was that…?"

"Right you are." Mei nodded, an amused smile on her face. "I was talking about Mr. Chibiki."

6

Soon after that, Mr. Chibiki, the "master" of the secondary library, appeared. Right after I had returned the 1972 yearbook to the shelf.

"Oho. Two of you today, eh?" he called over to us after realizing we were there, then went immediately behind his counter. That was all he said. He was dressed in his usual all-black clothes and black-rimmed glasses, and his salt-and-pepper straw-like hair complemented his pale, skinny face. He really was a far cry from the

“fired-up educator” my grandmother recalled.

“We’re up to two people being ‘not there,’” Mei answered, getting up from her chair.

Resting both elbows on the counter, Mr. Chibiki said, “So it would seem. I heard something about it.”

“Do you think it’s going to work?”

“Well, now.” His expression hardened ever so slightly before he answered. “I can’t say, to be honest. It’s never been attempted before.”

Then his eyes shifted to me.

“You understand the situation now, Sakakibara, is that right?”

“Yes, but…”

“But? You don’t believe it?”

“That’s not it…Well, yes it is. Part of me still can’t believe in it completely, I guess.”

“I see-e-e.”

His elbows resting on the counter, the all-in-black librarian dug his fingers into his hair.

“I suppose I can’t blame you. If I were in your position and I heard a story like that out of the blue…Absolutely.”

His hand paused, his hair still caught in its grip, and his eyebrows pinched together sharply.

“However,” he continued, “this is true. This is a phenomenon that

is actually taking place in our school, in our town of Yomiyama."

A phenomenon, huh?

The words Mei had spoken last week, crediting the explanation to "someone," rose from memory.

It isn't anything a person could have done. ***That's the kind of "phenomenon" it is.***

She'd used a similar term. She had also told me, *That's why this is different from what you'd call a curse.*

When I realized that "someone" was the person standing in front of me now, all sorts of details seemed to come together. As I tried to imagine the fact that this man who had been the head teacher for third-year Class 3 twenty-six years ago had now, twenty-six years later, switched roles to become a librarian and was still at the school —as I tried to imagine how that had happened…

"Um…"

I stood up and walked over to stand before the counter next to Mei.

"So you were a social studies teacher and you sponsored the theater club. And twenty-six years ago you were in charge of third-year Class 3, so you knew my mother…"

"That's right. I suppose you realized that when you came here last time and looked at that yearbook."

"Um, yeah…But how did you wind up here?"

"That's a difficult question to answer."

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Misaki didn’t tell you about it?”

I glanced over at Mei. “No, she didn’t.”

“I see-e-e.”

Mr. Chibiki looked up at the clock on the wall. A little more than thirty minutes had passed since the start of fifth period.

“You have art this period on Thursdays, don’t you? I suppose you’ll both be missing the extended homeroom next period, too?”

Mei and I exchanged a quick look, and then we both nodded.

“We thought everyone would feel better if we weren’t there.”

“No doubt. You made the right decision.”

“Um, sir?” I decided to pose a question that had just occurred to me. “Is it all right that you’re not ignoring us?”

“Could you stop calling me ‘sir’? ‘Mr. Chibiki’ is fine.”

“Oh…all right.”

“It’s because I don’t have any ties to your class, you see. Those with no direct link to third-year Class 3 are what you might call safe. So even if I interact with you two normally, it shouldn’t have any effect.”

Yes, of course. Obviously that’s why Mei had been able to come in here now and then and get all that information out of him.

“Now, as for your previous question,” Mr. Chibiki continued, lowering himself into the chair on the other side of the counter.

“Why don’t I take this opportunity to tell you a story? Misaki here has only heard fragments of it so far.”

7

“To be honest, I don’t like to speak too much about what happened twenty-six years ago. Though I may be the last person at this school who directly experienced the event.”

Third-year Class 3, twenty-six years ago. The death of Misaki, who was popular with everyone. And then…

“Nobody had any ill intentions,” Mr. Chibiki said in a low, pinched voice. “I was still young and clung to certain ideals as an educator…I behaved as I thought right. The students did the same. Though now I find it a frivolous way of thinking. As a result, **that** became the trigger and, in a manner of speaking, ‘the doors to death’ swung open at this school.

“I bear the responsibility for that. I also feel responsible for being unable to stop the ‘disasters’ that began the following year. That’s why I’ve stayed at this school. I quit being a teacher and became the librarian—which was in part **running away**.”

“Running away?” I cut in inadvertently. “How is that running away?”

“Half the reason I stopped being a teacher was a guilty conscience. That I had no right to be a teacher. But the other half was stark fear that if I became the head teacher for third-year Class 3

again, I might be the one dragged to my ‘death’ next. So I ran away.”

“Do teachers die too?”

“If they’re the head teacher or the assistant teacher, yes. **Because they’re members of third-year Class 3.** The teachers who merely supervise classes are **out of range**.”

Oh, so then…I realized something then.

The way Yuya Mochizuki had been constantly obsessing over how much Ms. Mikami had been out lately. So that hadn’t just been him worrying about the health of the teacher he was crushing on. He’d truly been concerned that the next of the calamities might have befallen her, since she was the assistant teacher for our class.

“That’s why I ran away,” Mr. Chibiki repeated. “But I didn’t want to run away from the school entirely. By a lucky chance, the position here in the library became available, so I decided to hunker down **right here**. To always be **right here** to watch how things unfold… Ah, but now I’ve gotten ahead of myself.”

Mr. Chibiki’s lips curved with a fair amount of self-deprecation and he shook his head slowly back and forth. That was the point at which I asked, “The Misaki from twenty-six years ago—was it a boy or a girl?”

“He was a boy.”

I got my answer as if it were nothing.

“Misaki was his first name. Written with the character for ‘cape’ as in ‘Cape Cod.’”

“What was his last name?”

“Yomiyama.”

“Excuse me?”

“It was Yomiyama. The same as the name of this town. His full name was Misaki Yomiyama.”

His last name was Yomiyama? Well…I guess. Like Mr. Adachi living in the Adachi ward or Ms. Musashino from Musashino City.

I looked over at Mei. Mei looked over at me, too, then shook her head slightly. She probably meant *I didn’t know that until he said it just now, either.*

“So Misaki was in a plane crash or something?” I asked, checking the story with him.

“It was a fire.”

The answer was just as easy to get as the last one.

“A story like this typically changes and gets embellished as it passes from person to person. For some reason a version involving a plane crash seems to have caught on, but it was actually a house fire. One night in May, Misaki Yomiyama’s house was completely destroyed in a fire. And his entire family died. His parents as well as his little brother, who was one year younger than him.”

“What caused it?”

“No one knows. They decided, at least, that it hadn’t been a crime. Though there’s a version of the story that says it was a meteorite.”

“Seriously?”

“Misaki’s house was on the western outskirts of town, near Asamidai. There was testimony that a huge shooting star was seen falling near there that night. So people say that could have caused the fire. Though I’ve never heard that any trace of it was ever identified. So this is nothing more than another rumor, I suppose.”

“…Ah.”

“Those are the facts surrounding the death of Misaki Yomiyama twenty-six years ago as I remember them. However…” Mr. Chibiki’s eyes dropped to his hands. His voice grew even lower as he added, “However, I have no confidence that my memories are entirely correct.”

“What?”

“It could be that there’s a gap, or that a revision has been made to some part of them. Without my ever realizing it. And I don’t mean simply because the memories are from so long ago. How should I put it? If I don’t continually work very hard to pay attention, my memories of these events tend to get fuzzy. More than any of the other clutter in there. I don’t know why, but that’s how it seems. Though it may not quite click for the two of you even when I explain it.”

Feedback from “entering the realm of legend”—Those were the words and the image that popped suddenly into my mind.

“What about the group photo after graduation, where Misaki showed up even though he couldn’t possibly have been there?” I

asked. “Sir…I mean, Mr. Chibiki, did you see it?”

“I did.”

Mr. Chibiki nodded, then cast his gaze up to the ceiling for a moment.

“I was in that photo, too, in the old classroom here in the former school building. A few days later, the students began to get stirred up and several of them brought the photo in question to me. They shoved it at me. It absolutely looked like the dead boy was in it. Misaki Yomiyama. In fact, I do believe that Ritsuko was one of the ones who came to me back then.”

“My mom?”

“As I remember it, that is.”

“Do you still have that photo?”

“No.” Mr. Chibiki’s mouth drew tight. “They made another print of it for me, but I threw it away. Seeing everything that happened after that, I got scared, to be honest. I even thought the disasters were happening because the thing existed.”

“Ah…” I sighed, and tiny goose bumps pricked both my arms.

“Let’s skip ahead, shall we?” Mr. Chibiki said, dropping his eyes to his hands once more. “The next year, I was in charge of a first-year class, so I only know what happened in third-year Class 3 that year from a third-person perspective. How they were short one desk and chair at the start of the first semester. How at least one of the students in the class or their relatives died each month. Even when I heard the stories, I never actively made the connection to what had

happened the year before. All I did was feel sad at the terrible misfortunes they continued to suffer.

"In the end, sixteen people with a connection to the class lost their lives in that one year. Once the graduation ceremony was over, the teacher in charge of third-year Class 3 told me something. It seems that one extra student had made their way into the class for the year. That **an 'extra person' who couldn't possibly have been there** had infiltrated the class. He said that as soon as the graduation ceremony was over, the student disappeared and that was when he finally realized."

"That Misaki's little brother was the 'extra person who couldn't possibly have been there,' since he'd died the year before?"

"So it seems. But—"

The edges of Mr. Chibiki's lips twitched, and he hesitated for several moments before answering.

"It feels more correct to tell you that in all honesty, I couldn't say. Hasn't Miss Misaki here told you? Those directly involved in this 'phenomenon' plaguing third-year Class 3 can't hold on to their memories about who the 'extra person' in the class is for very long. The memory fades with time, and then it disappears.

"The fact is, by the time a month had passed, the teacher who revealed the situation to me had completely forgotten **what had occurred**, and even my memory of it was becoming unreliable. It's only because I made notes about it in a notebook at the time that I even barely recall it."

Suppose a levee breaks and water from the river floods the town. It's like the water is finally receding…

The metaphor Mei had told me last week, heard from "someone."

The fact that there was a flood remains, unquestionably, but after the water recedes, the memory of what got flooded and how badly starts to get fuzzy. It's like that.

It's more that they can't help forgetting, not that they're forced to forget, I guess.

"The same sort of 'phenomenon' happened to the next year's third-year Class 3 as well, and many people died. Those involved began to recognize that this was odd and that something was going on. And then—"

Mr. Chibiki tangled the fingers of his right hand in his straw-like hair, mussing it wildly.

"And then the year after that—in 1976, I was assigned to take charge of third-year Class 3 again. That was when I experienced **it**. As a member of the class that people had already begun to call cursed…"

8

The year before—1975—had been an "off year." Clinging to the hope that perhaps those things weren't going to happen anymore, Mr. Chibiki took over third-year Class 3 for 1976. However.

That was an “on year.”

The result was that in one year, five students from third-year Class 3 and nine of their immediate family members lost their lives: a total of fourteen people. Accident followed on illness, followed on suicide, then murder…There were many ways that they died.

Maybe it’s ***this classroom*** *that’s “cursed,”* Mr. Chibiki thought. So he appealed to the school and tried changing to a different classroom. That had been right after summer break. But still the months of disasters never stopped. After the graduation ceremony in March, “the extra person who couldn’t possibly have been there” (i.e., “the casualty”) vanished.

And though he’d been the head teacher for the class, Mr. Chibiki said he simply couldn’t remember who the “extra person” had been. He’d collected information later on and found the name of a person **who seemed to be a likely candidate**, but the memories weren’t there as something he’d actually experienced. He’d forgotten. At that point he hadn’t fully grasped this problem with the memories of those involved…

As we listened to him tell the story, fifth period ended and the start of sixth period had left us far behind.

Outside, the rain continued to fall. Over the course of this hour, it had grown quite heavy. The old, grimy windows of the library shook in the wind and raindrops occasionally slapped against the glass.

“…And then three years after that, I once again had the chance to be head teacher for third-year Class 3. I considered quitting my job, but I wasn’t in a position to do it. I prayed for that year to be an ‘off

year,' but that's not what happened."

Mr. Chibiki continued his tale in a low voice, and Mei and I continued to listen, not moving a muscle.

"That year was the first that we tried a modest countermeasure suggested by the school. We changed the class designations from the old 'Class 1,' 'Class 2,' and so on to 'Class A,' 'Class B,' et cetera. Third-year Class 3 became third-year Class C. We thought that perhaps if the name of the 'site' were to change, the curse might be broken, but…"

So it hadn't worked.

I'd heard that from Mei, so I already knew about it. They'd considered and implemented all kinds of different "countermeasures," but none of them had had any effect. Because finally, after all the rest, they had found "an effective way to counter the situation"—namely, **this tactic** of "treating someone as if they're 'not there' in place of the 'extra person' in the class."

"…The result was the same. Many people died that year, too."

Mr. Chibiki let out a long, frustrated sigh, then looked up through his bangs at us to gauge our reactions. All I could manage was a silent nod.

"**It seems** that the 'extra person' that year was a girl who'd died in third-year Class 3 in '76. Once the graduation ceremony ended and that became apparent, I immediately made a note of her name. So that even after my memories about the 'extra person' had disappeared, I was able to assure myself that 'that's what it says

happened.' It was around this time that I also began to realize that the 'extra person' who infiltrated the class seemed to be a 'casualty' appearing at random from the ranks of people who had lost their lives in the 'disasters' brought about by the 'phenomenon' up to that point."

Mr. Chibiki gave another long sigh.

"That was the last year before I quit being a teacher. It's been eighteen years now. The principal at the time was adamant that talk of a curse or whatever this is not become public. But at the same time, he gave me what consideration he could and I was able to remain at the school as a librarian.

"I've been **in here** ever since. **In here**, just keeping an eye on things, as I still do. I decided I would observe each year's 'phenomenon' as a third party. And, well, sometimes students pop up to talk with me, like you two did."

Mr. Chibiki broke off and then once again looked up at us to gauge our reactions. His face showed that the tension he'd borne all through the conversation had eased considerably.

"Um," I interjected. "Can I ask you something?"

"What's that?"

"Misaki told me that while the 'extra person'—'the casualty'—is hiding in the class, records and memories seem to get tampered with all over the place. So the details that would normally never make sense *do* make sense and no one realizes the true identity of 'the casualty.' Does that really happen?"

“It really does.”

I didn’t detect even a breath of hesitation in Mr. Chibiki’s answer.

“But it’s no use asking why or how it’s done. Because no matter how much you question it, it can’t be explained with perfect logic. All you can do is tell yourself, **that’s how the ‘phenomenon’ works**.”

I couldn’t say anything.

“Maybe you don’t believe that.”

“Well, it doesn’t make me doubt the idea any more than I already did.”

“I see-e-e.”

Mr. Chibiki languidly removed his glasses, and then dug around in a pocket of his pants before pulling out a wrinkled handkerchief. He wiped his lenses clean for a long moment; then—

“Well, then—” Lifting his head, he restored his glasses to their place and fixed his eyes on us. “Yes, I may as well show **it** to you. That’s probably the fastest way.”

Then he opened a drawer in the desk built into the other side of the counter. After rummaging noisily through its contents for a few moments, he took something out.

It was a binder with a dark black cover.

“Have a look at these examples. They illustrate the situation pretty well.”

Mr. Chibiki held the binder out to us across the counter. I took it from him, my fingers resting nervously on the cover.

“I keep copies of the third-year Class 3 class lists in here. Twenty-seven years’ worth, from 1972 through this year. They’re filed in order with the newest lists on top, so the years go backward.”

I turned back the cover as he explained his system.

And he was right: The first two pages were for 1998—in other words, the class list for the current third-year Class 3. Mr. Kubodera and Ms. Mikami—the names of the head teacher and the assistant teacher—were proclaimed clearly, and below that stretched the list of students’ last names.

My name, Koichi Sakakibara, had been handwritten in the very last row on page two. Because I was a transfer student who’d started late. And then—

To the left of two names—Yukari Sakuragi and Ikuo Takabayashi—an *X* had been written in red pen. Their names and contact information were on the list, and in the space to the right someone had written in beside Sakuragi “May 26—accident at school” and “Same day—mother (Mieko)—car accident”; and beside Takabayashi “June 6—illness.” There was one other: in the space to the right of Takeru Mizuno’s row was written “June 3—older sister (Sanae)—accident at work.”

“Take a look at the year before last.”

Last year had been an “off year.” That must be why he told me to look up the year before, I reasoned. I did as I was told and opened to the page where the class list from 1996 had been filed.

“I’m sure you’ve already realized this, but the names with a red *X* beside them are the people who died that year. There are also notes on the date and manner of their deaths. There are also similar notes when family members have died, you see?”

“Yes…”

I counted the number of *X*s next to students’ names for that year and found there were four. Three names of family members who died. So altogether there were seven people…

“You see the name written in at the very bottom of the second page, in blue ink?”

“…Uh, yes.”

Mami Asakura

That was the name.

“That was the ‘casualty’ that year,” Mr. Chibiki said.

At my side, Mei’s body jerked closer to me to examine the file in my hands. I could feel her breath right against me, which scattered my thoughts in all directions.

“The girl named Mami Asakura was a student mixed up in the class from the beginning of April all the way to the graduation ceremony in March the following year. Without anyone ever realizing that she was an ‘extra person’ who couldn’t possibly have been there.”

“Um, Mr. Chibiki?” I asked. “There are seven people who died that year. Meaning that it wasn’t ‘at least one person dying a month,’ right?”

“Ah, yes. That’s because they enacted the ‘countermeasure’ that year.”

“They did?”

“It was the **talisman** I believe you’ve become quite familiar with by now. They treated someone in the class as if they were ‘not there.’”

“Oh, right.”

“They were successful, too, so no one died in the first half of the year. But then soon after the second semester began, something unexpected occurred.”

“What does that mean?”

“The student who had taken on the role of being ‘not there’ couldn’t bear the pressure and alienation any longer and compromised the class’s ‘decision.’ The student started begging with them, saying, ‘You think I’m not here? But I am. Take a good look, everybody! You’re gonna treat me like I’m here’…The strain became too great.”

"You're saying that's why the 'disaster' started?"

"It seems that way."

I couldn't help hearing a faint sigh escape Mei's lips.

I didn't know who they'd made "not there" that year, but because he (or maybe she) had abandoned that role partway through the year, seven people linked to the class had lost their lives. How had he (or maybe she) taken this cruel fact? How had he faced everyone in class, and himself? When I pictured it, tiny goose bumps rose on both my arms again.

"So," Mr. Chibiki continued. "'The casualty' for 1996 was a student named Mami Asakura, whose name you see written there. But that name isn't actually on the class list for that year. She was originally a student in third-year Class 3 three years earlier, in 1993. If you look back, you'll see that she lost her life in the 'disasters' of that year."

I flipped through the pages in the file and checked the class list for 1993.

Just as Mr. Chibiki had said, Mami Asakura's name was listed there, right alongside a red *X*. In the space to the right, he had written "October 9—illness."

"…This is what I mean when I say that at the time **everything is consistent, the way it's supposed to be**. Incidentally"— Mr. Chibiki leaned forward across the counter and lightly flicked his index finger on an edge of the binder—**"between April two years ago and the following March, this didn't look like this."**

"It didn't?"

"As far as I remember, anyway. In April 1996, Mami Asakura's name should have been on the class list since she was part of the class. And I'm going off of my memory now, but her name wasn't where it belonged on the class list for '93. Which tells me that it disappeared. And of course that includes the *X* next to her name and the note about her death."

"You're saying all of it disappeared?"

"Yes."

Mr. Chibiki nodded without a smile.

"So you see, while the 'phenomenon' is in effect for a given year, it doesn't matter where you search. You accomplish nothing. And it isn't just the class lists. The same sort of thing happens to other records at school and official documents, even to people's diaries or notes or photos or videotapes, and even computer data. It doesn't matter what it is. Some kind of tampering or corruption occurs that common sense would tell you is impossible, and it conceals the contradictions that ought to arise when 'the casualty' mixes in with everyone. Details that shouldn't match up just do."

"But it wasn't just things like records, was it? It affected the memories of the people involved, too, right?"

"That's right. Take the example of two years ago. Even in my role as an 'observer,' **I never had the slightest suspicion about the presence of Mami Asakura, even though she shouldn't have been there**. In reality, she passed away at the age of fourteen in

October 1993, but everyone had forgotten that fact. Her family, her friends, her teachers…Everyone.

"Not to mention that she was still fourteen at the point that she slipped in as 'the casualty' in '96 and everyone believed the **false reality** that she was starting her third year. Absolutely no one doubted it. No one could have. The memories of the past and all the other details that involved her were tampered with and altered to make sense of it. And so a year went by, and when 'the casualty' vanished after the graduation ceremony, all our memories and records finally went back to **the way they were supposed to be**. And all of the people who'd been close to her—the minds of people like her classmates and family were at the core of it—they all lost their memories that she had ever appeared as 'the casualty.'"

My eyes still fixed on the class list in the binder, my response died on my lips. *That's beyond ludicrous.* Even if I were to say it aloud, it wouldn't change anything. That's how I felt.

"Why do these things happen? As I said before, the logic is utterly inscrutable. And the mechanisms behind it are inexplicable, as well. It could very well be that **no physical change is actually occurring to make names appear or disappear on the class list**. I've tried to picture the situation in that way."

"What do you mean?"

Mei was the one who asked the question.

Deep vertical lines creased the skin between Mr. Chibiki's eyes. "I mean that **maybe the problem only arises in the minds of the people involved. Maybe it's us**. Our minds are all interpreting

physical changes that aren't actually happening as 'changes that are happening.'"

"Like collective hypnosis?"

"Right. Maybe it's something like that. Centered on this school and extending out to the entire town of Yomiyama. And sometimes farther, into the outside world."

At that point, Mr. Chibiki gave another drawn-out sigh.

"Still, even that is just the irresponsible conjecture/delusion that I've reached after long years as an 'observer.' I have no evidence, and there's no way to prove it. Even if it could be proven, I don't know what that would mean."

Neither of us could offer a response.

"Basically, I've given up." Mr. Chibiki lifted both of his hands in an echo of his words. "You could say that after all this time, there's pretty much only one thing that I've learned has any appreciable effect. That being the 'strategy' you two are currently using: the 'strategy' of turning someone in the class into someone who's 'not there.' It's a strange countermeasure that someone thought up ten years ago, I believe. But despite the years when the 'strategy' successfully contains the 'disaster,' there are also cases like two years ago where the 'strategy' fails partway through the year."

"Two years ago…" Mei's voice was unexpectedly reedy. Her body leaned snugly against mine again as she looked down at the binder in my hands. "Wasn't Ms. Mikami the head teacher for third-year Class 3 that year?"

“Wha—?” I started and looked down at the class list again. And there it was. Ms. Mikami’s name was listed as the head teacher. “Hey, you’re right.”

“You didn’t know?” Mr. Chibiki wore a faint look of surprise on his face. He tapped the center of his pale forehead with the tip of the middle finger on his right hand. “She must have had a terrible time with it, too. And then for her to become the assistant teacher for Class 3 again this year…”

10

Mr. Chibiki told us a few other stories about the “phenomenon” for a little longer.

Speaking for myself, I was getting a lot of information for the first time. But that couldn’t have been true for Mei. Didn’t she already know more than a little of what she was hearing?

Information I was getting for the first time. One example of that was the rule about the “range” for the “disasters.” Mr. Chibiki, the self-identified “observer,” had worked it out based on the facts he’d been recording all this time.

“It seems the ‘disasters’ only reach as far as the members of the class and their family members within two degrees,” Mr. Chibiki told us with deep gravity. “Meaning parents, grandparents, and siblings. **Blood relationship** is a condition, as well. Never once has a relative with no blood ties died, like stepparents or stepsiblings. I think it’s safe to consider them **out of range**.”

“Related by blood, huh?”

Mei had murmured the question.

Parents, grandparents, and brothers and sisters related by blood. So then **aunts, uncles, and cousins** weren’t included.

“The ‘range’ also includes the issue of **geographic range**. I believe I mentioned earlier that the occurrence of this ‘phenomenon’ centers on this school and the town of Yomiyama. So it seems that **the farther away from town you go, the weaker its effect on you**.”

“You mean if you go far enough away, you’re safe?”

“To make a simplistic comparison, it’s similar to getting no service on a cell phone. To date, there hasn’t been a single case of a family member living in some other, distant location being affected by the ‘disasters.’ And there are extremely few examples of someone who lives in Yomiyama dying outside of town. So…”

Didn’t that mean that if it came down to it, you could just leave town?

“Um…Do you mind if I ask you something?” The memory hit me suddenly, so I wanted to ask. “Did anything ever happen on a class trip, a long time ago?”

I wasn’t surprised to see Mr. Chibiki’s brows knit morosely at that. “The tragedy of ’87.”

“…What?”

“There was a terrible accident during the class trip in 1987. At the

time, the class trip was held during the first semester of third year. But since the trips went to other prefectures—were 'out of range,' in other words—the students in Class 3 had never been affected by the 'disasters.' But then—"

The lines between Mr. Chibiki's brows furrowed even more deeply and as he spoke, his voice betrayed the faintest hint of pain.

"That year, the students were put onto buses by class number and then left Yomiyama for the airport. There was an accident on the way there. They were on the highway, right on the edge of town, when a truck going the opposite direction plowed into the bus the students in Class 3 were riding on. The driver had been asleep at the wheel."

My eyes widened as a stab went through my heart. I looked to my side to see Mei's reaction, but her expression hadn't changed in the slightest. She must have known about this already.

"The head teacher, who'd been riding with them, and six of the students in Class 3 died in that tragic accident. A total of seven people. The bus behind theirs was involved in the accident as well, which resulted in a few collateral deaths outside of Class 3."

"So then…That's why the next year they started having the class trip during second-year?"

"That's right." Mr. Chibiki nodded, his brow still furrowed. "And not just the class trip, either. They won't even go on field trips. Ever since that tragedy, third-years as a unit no longer have any activities in which the students get on buses and leave the school."

Just then, the crackling bell announcing the end of sixth period began to ring.

Mr. Chibiki glanced at the clock on the wall and then slumped into the chair on the other side of the counter. He removed his glasses and once again began to polish them with his handkerchief.

“Let’s leave it at that for today. I warmed to my topic and talked much too long, I think.”

“No, thank you. Do you mind talking just a little bit longer?”

“What about?”

“Well, I’d like to hear about the effectiveness of the ‘strategy,’ if you don’t mind.”

I rested my elbows on the counter and fixed my gaze on the librarian’s wan face.

“You said this ‘strategy’ of making someone in the class ‘not there’ started ten years ago. What has the success rate been since then?”

“I see. That’s an issue that cuts close to home.” Mr. Chibiki leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, then took a single, deep breath. Without shifting his position, keeping his eyes closed, he replied, “In ’88—the first year—it was a success. Apparently there was no doubt that ‘the casualty’ had infiltrated the class in April, but no one ever died. The ‘tragedy of ’87’ had happened only the year before, so I suppose people were desperate to try anything when they worked out this new idea. Whatever the case, it was the beginning of the tradition that this ‘strategy’ must be implemented in an ‘on year.’

“And from the following year on up to today, not including the current year, there have been five ‘on years’ in total. As I mentioned, in the year before last, the ‘strategy’ failed partway through the year. Of the other four, I believe it succeeded twice and failed twice.”

“When you say it failed, you mean that the student who was chosen to be ‘not there’ abandoned that role, right?”

“No, not necessarily,” Mr. Chibiki replied, opening his eyes. “This ‘strategy’ involves a great many regulations, or guidelines, I suppose you could say. For example, you only need to treat the one selected like they’re ‘not there’ at school, but it’s fine to interact with them outside of school. But you can’t do it even outside of school during school activities. Things like that. Distressingly, it seems that none of these guidelines are absolute. Meaning that there’s no way to be sure what people did wrong to trigger the failure…”

“…That’s awful.”

“That’s how it is, as far as we know,” Mr. Chibiki said glumly, and pushed the bridge of his glasses up. “I’ve tried thinking up all sorts of analogies over the years. First of all, I don’t believe this is what you might call a ‘curse.’ To be sure, the incident with Misaki twenty-six years ago set the whole thing off in the first place, but these calamities are not raining down on us because of the workings of his angry spirit or a grudge he bore. And people don’t die because ‘the casualty’ hiding in the class has lifted a hand against them or somehow willed it to happen.

“**No one’s malice or desire to hurt people is behind this.** Not

in the slightest. I suppose you could argue that there's the malice of an invisible force befalling us. People sense that sort of thing in disasters. But that's the same way people feel about any natural disaster.

"This is simply **happening**. That's why it's not a 'curse,' it's a 'phenomenon.' A natural phenomenon like a typhoon or an earthquake, though a supernatural one."

"A supernatural natural phenomenon?"

"I hope you understand my aversion to calling this a 'supernatural phenomenon.' I suspect that the logic behind the 'strategy' to prevent it is similar. For example—" Mr. Chibiki looked over at the window. "It's raining. In order to prevent the rain from getting us wet, the best thing we can do is not go outside. If we wind up going outside anyway, our strategy is to use an umbrella. But it's difficult to entirely prevent the rain from getting us wet, even using an umbrella. Even when the rain is falling in a predictable way, the angle you hold your umbrella at or the way you walk can cause you to get soaking wet. And yet, using the umbrella is far better than not using one at all."

Mr. Chibiki turned his eyes back to us, as if asking, *How's that?*

I struggled to find a response, but Mei spoke up quietly beside me. "You could also compare it to drought and rain dances."

"Oh?"

"We're suffering from a drought. Dancing to bring the rain is pointless, but if you were to light a fire and send smoke up into the

sky, in principle that would work. But there are times when that has an effect on the atmosphere and makes the rain fall, and times when it doesn't."

"Huh. **Not bad.**"

"Uh, so then, Mr. Chibiki?"

I was pretty much done hearing comparisons, so I cut in.

"What's going to happen this year? Are the 'disasters' going to stop now that two of us are 'not there'?"

"I told you, I can't honestly say. But"—Mr. Chibiki pushed the bridge of his glasses up again—"the 'disasters' have almost never stopped partway through a year once they've started. So…"

"'**Almost never**'?" I tried to cling to the strictest meaning of his words. "Meaning that it *has* stopped before. That's—"

Brr-r-r-r-ring-g-g-g. Just then, something that sounded like an old-timey telephone started ringing. Ignoring my question, Mr. Chibiki extracted a black device from a pocket of his jacket. So it was the ring tone on his cell phone.

"I apologize. Just a moment…"

Mr. Chibiki put the phone to his ear. He exchanged a few words with someone in a low voice that I couldn't make out, and then put the phone back in his pocket.

"That's it for today. You can come back another time."

"Oh, all right."

"Although I'll be out, starting tomorrow. I have a bit of mundane business to take care of, so I'll be out of town for a few days. I'm planning to be back at the beginning of next month at the latest."

Mr. Chibiki's face looked incredibly fatigued when he said that.

He rose unhurriedly from his chair and extended a hand for the black binder I held…But just then, I recalled **something**.

"Um, actually"—I spoke up quickly—"there's one other thing I'd like to check with you today."

"Mm-hm?"

"It's about what happened fifteen years ago. Was 1983 an 'on year' or was it an 'off year'?"

"Eighty-three?"

"You have the class list for that year in here, too, don't you? So then…"

I started to flip through the pages in the binder, but Mr. Chibiki raised one hand slightly and stopped me.

"No, Sakakibara, there's no need to check. I remember it. The fourth year after I'd fled into my role as the librarian…'83 was an 'on year.' That year, third-year Class 3 had…"

"Yeah?" I bleated, impatient. "It was? I thought maybe it hadn't been, but I…Yeah."

"Why do you ask? Did something happen that year that you…? Oh. I see."

At that point, Mr. Chibiki seemed to have **realized** as well. "I see. Reiko's year."

"…Yes."

That was the year Reiko, now twenty-nine, had been in her third year of middle school—1983. The year she'd been a member of third-year Class 3 at North Yomi. And also…

"That was the year Ritsuko—the year your mother passed away."

A new cloud darkened Mr. Chibiki's expression.

"Did that happen…in this town, by any chance?"

"She came back to her parents' house in Yomiyama in order to give birth, and she stayed at their house for a little while after I was born, too. So…"

"So **she died in this town**," Mr. Chibiki murmured ruefully. "I never realized it at the time. I see. So that's what happened."

I see. So that's what happened.

The death of my mother Ritsuko fifteen years ago.

She was doing poorly after the birth, and then she'd caught a summer cold that had taken a turn for the worse…That was what I'd always heard about her death, up until now. But maybe it had actually been one of the "disasters" brought about by the "phenomenon" involving third-year Class 3 at North Yomi…No, there was no "maybe" about it. That must have been what happened.

A simple turn in luck…Of course, there was a possibility that was all it was. But given the position I was in right now, I could hardly

bring myself to believe that.

Chapter 11

July I

1

The rest of June passed uneventfully and rolled into July.

A fresh disaster that befell the class as soon as the new month began was, thankfully, not a result of the changing month. So Mei and I continued our strange life at school basically unchanged, as the two students who were “not there.” For my part, it went by in the midst of peace and tranquillity, not as uncomfortable as it had felt at the beginning but still holding the threat that we would never know when the peace would shatter.

Mr. Chibiki, true to his word, was briefly gone from school the very next day, and I never laid eyes on him for the remainder of June. The secondary library in Building Zero stayed closed the whole time, I guess because they didn’t have the staff to replace him.

I had a chance to learn what sort of “mundane business” Mr. Chibiki had left town for later on. Apparently he had a wife and kids who had lived away from him for a long time, staying in Sapporo, where his wife had been born. She had called him, so he’d gone to Hokkaido.

I never found out more details than that, but I could imagine. It could be that the reason his family lived somewhere else was because of this “phenomenon” that Mr. Chibiki had entrenched himself at North Yomi to “observe.” Maybe it wasn’t because the couple didn’t get along, but instead because he’d sent his wife and

kids to live far away "out of range" so that, remote as the chance might be, they wouldn't be caught up in the "disasters." Or something like that.

And then there was a separate issue.

Recently, one fact at least had become unexpectedly clear. I found out about it in the form of an announcement from Mei.

"Yesterday, one of my senpai came to the gallery. A girl named Tachibana that I know from the art club. She graduated two years ago. And she used to be in third-year Class 3. She likes dolls, so she's come by the gallery occasionally for a while now. But I hadn't seen her in a long time."

This was the first I'd ever heard of her having a senpai like that. Ignoring my slight surprise, Mei went on: "I guess she heard **some rumors about what's going on this year**, so…"

"You mean she came to see you because she was worried?"

Mei inclined her head ambiguously at my question. "More like she didn't want to get involved, but it kept bothering her, so she ended up coming by…I guess."

She gave me her detached read on it.

"I think Mochizuki might be the source of the rumors. She acted like she knew I was the one who's 'not there' this year. But she didn't really give me any advice or anything. And talking about stuff, she looked really jumpy…So I made the first move and brought up a couple questions I had."

The first had been a question about the "extra person" ("the

casualty") who'd infiltrated third-year Class 3 two years ago.

Mei asked Tachibana about her, mentioning the name "Mami Asakura" that she'd gotten from Mr. Chibiki's binder. "Do you remember someone with that name being in your class?"

The result was, basically, exactly as Mr. Chibiki had told us: "No, I don't," she'd answered. Then she'd added uncertainly, "But after everything was over, I heard stories that there was a girl with that name…" Meaning that the loss of memories involving the identity of "the casualty" had in fact happened to her, the former member of third-year Class 3.

The other question was about the student who'd been made "not there" in third-year Class 3 two years ago.

"What was he like?" Mei had asked, cutting straight to the point. "The 'disasters' started because he violated the class's 'decision' partway through the year, right? What happened to him after that?"

"She said it was a boy named Sakuma two years ago. Apparently he was always a quiet, unobtrusive kid."

As detached as always, Mei related **the facts** that she'd extracted from the girl Tachibana.

"It was a little after the start of second semester when Sakuma abandoned his role as 'not there.' Then the 'disasters' started at the beginning of October, apparently. People died in November and December, and then…after New Year's, Sakuma killed himself."

"Oh. Suicide, huh?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask what happened after that, but he

might have been the ‘death for January’ in ’96.”

It was afternoon, during a break in the perpetual rain. We’d gone down to the bank of the Yomiyama River and were watching the cool water flow by as we talked. We had cut afternoon classes, and without either of us making the suggestion outright, we’d left the school grounds.

We returned to school through the back gate around the time sixth period would be ending. When we came back in, someone shouted at us, “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

Must be the gym teacher, Mr. Miyamoto, I guessed immediately. I suppose he’d spotted us from far away and mistaken us for regular students who’d cut out of school. He came running up to us.

“Hold it right there! Where were you two off to at this time of…”

That was as far as he got before he came to a halt and took another look at us, the words *Wait a second*— clear on his face. Then he swallowed the rest of his lecture.

I gave a slight, silent dip of my head and Mr. Miyamoto kind of awkwardly turned his eyes in some other direction. With a sigh he said, “This must be tough on you two. Still, I can’t really condone you leaving school. You need to cut back on that.”

2

With all this going on, I made up my mind to ask Reiko about it again. After much tortured thought with no results, I just couldn’t

stay quiet any longer.

That was—yes—the night of the last Saturday in June.

"Um, I heard something from Mr. Chibiki, the librarian, the other day."

I spoke up, unprompted, to stop Reiko as she was getting ready to withdraw in silence to the side house after dinner. Right then, I couldn't worry about my grandparents' eyes being on us.

"Uh, I heard that…in your last year of middle school, when you were in third-year Class 3, that was actually an 'on year.'"

"…An 'on year'?"

Reiko's face had until then worn a dreamy, zoned-out look, but now wariness flashed across it…Or so it seemed.

"A year when an unidentified 'extra person' joins the class and 'disasters' befall people. Meaning that every month, people linked to the class lose their lives in one way or another. That's what they call 'the curse of Class 3.' Of course you know that, right, Reiko?"

"Oh…Yeah, you're right," Reiko replied, her voice husky. Then she curled her right hand into a fist and thumped herself on the head. "Right. That's what that means."

It had been a long time since I'd talked to Reiko like this… Naturally, I was incredibly nervous, and she definitely felt the same.

"I'm sorry, Koichi. Really sorry." Reiko swung her head slowly back and forth. "I'm useless…"

I couldn't help seeing my mother's face from the yearbook overlay

itself on Reiko's ashen features. Struggling to quiet the fevered ache in the sinews of my heart, I said, "I want to ask you something about fifteen years ago. When my mom had me and then died in this town…Was that one of the 'disasters' for that year?"

Without confirming or denying it, Reiko only repeated herself: "I'm sorry, Koichi."

I'd tried to talk to Reiko about what happened fifteen years ago once before. That was when I'd learned that she, like my mother, had been in Class 3 her third year.

Did they say "the curse of Class 3" about your class or anything like that back then?

Reiko had shrugged off my question by saying, "That was fifteen years ago. I forget."

Had she been playing dumb? Or had her memories of something that happened fifteen years ago truly become hazy? Normally, I would say it was the former, but the latter was hardly impossible. As Mr. Chibiki had explained to us, people's retention of memories concerning this "phenomenon" for the most part could definitely not be called good. Plus it seemed to vary between people.

"Well, Reiko?"

Still, I had to ask.

"What do you think it was?"

"…I don't know."

"Now hold on, Koichi. Why are you bringing this up all of a

sudden?"

My grandmother had been listening to our conversation as she cleared the table, but now she paused and her eyes widened.

Grandma probably doesn't know, I thought to myself then. Even on the outside chance that she had been told something of the situation in the past, her memories of it would certainly have gotten hazy by now…

"It's so sad…"

Suddenly, my grandfather broke his long silence. His emaciated shoulders trembled and his voice caught in his throat, as if he were choking on tears.

"Poor, poor Ritsuko. It's so sad, Ritsuko and Reiko both…"

"That's enough, now, Grandpa."

My grandmother hurried to his side. She rubbed his back and placated him as if he were a child throwing a tantrum.

"You mustn't start thinking like that. There, there. Go over there and have a rest now, Grandpa."

I felt as though I could hear the shrill voice of the myna bird Ray overlapping with my grandmother's voice. "Cheer…Cheer up!"

My grandmother took my grandfather's hand and helped him stand up. They eventually made their way out of the room, at which point—

"…About that year," Reiko said at last. "I honestly don't know about what happened to Ritsuko. But…I dunno, I feel like **it**

stopped partway through that year."

"It stopped?" Surprised, I repeated what she'd said. "You mean, the 'disasters' for that year?"

"Yeah…"

She nodded feebly and then thumped herself on the head again.

There were **almost** no cases where the "disasters" had stopped once they had begun. This was the question I'd had when Mr. Chibiki had said that. If "almost none" meant the same thing as "we can't say it's never happened," then that would mean there had to be "a case where they stopped partway through," meaning—

Had that rare case been the year that Reiko was in third year, fifteen years ago?

"Why is that?" Unable to contain my excitement, my words came out forcefully. "What made the 'disasters' stop that year, Reiko?"

But her reply was evasive: "…It's no use. It's all fuzzy. I can't really remember."

She thumped herself on the head a few more times, and languidly shook her head.

"Oh…But you know what? Something definitely happened that summer…"

In the end, that was all I got out of Reiko that night.

During what remained of June, I'd had two other opportunities to make my way to the town of Misaki, to "Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi."

Once, I swung by first thing after going to the municipal hospital for a prognosis on my collapsed lung.

I paid the fee, looked at the dolls, and went down, alone, into the basement display room, but I didn't encounter Mei that day. I hadn't told her I was coming, so I don't even know if she was at home. I didn't venture to ask the old woman—"Grandma Amane"—to have Mei come down. I contented myself with viewing several new creations by Kirika, then left a little less than an hour later.

It feels weird coming here and not running into Mei...The thought went through my mind that day.

The other time was the last day of June—the evening of Tuesday, the 30th. I'd wound up going because Mei invited me over on the way home from school.

I didn't go up to their home on the third floor that day. And I didn't see Kirika, either. We passed the time on the sofas on the first floor of the gallery, still empty of customers.

That was the first time I accepted the tea that Grandma Amane made for us. It was far, far tastier than canned iced tea at least, that's for sure.

"July starts tomorrow." Mei was the one who spoke first. I think it's fair to say those words implied something like "At last, after tomorrow, we'll get the moment of truth."

I was all too aware of that myself, but right then I deliberately dodged the issue. “The end-of-semester exams are starting next week already…Will you be okay?”

Mei pursed her lips a little petulantly. “That’s not really something someone who’s ‘not there’ needs to worry about, is it?”

“I guess that’s true, but…”

“I wish I could see your house sometime, Sakakibara.”

I faltered for a snappy response to the next of her out-of-the-blue observations.

“Uh, you mean—wait—my house in Tokyo?”

“No, here in Yomiyama.” Mei shook her head slightly and narrowed her right eye coolly. “The house where your mom grew up, in Furuchi.”

“Huh…Why?”

“…Just because.”

A short while later, Mei led me down to the basement. A gloomy string melody was playing in the gallery. I thought it might even be the same music that had been playing the first time I’d come here in May.

The space was crypt-like and sunken in chill, as always. The dolls were set out here, there, and everywhere, with all their various parts. I didn’t feel quite as captive to the sensation that I needed to breathe for all of them that day. Maybe I really was getting used to it.

Straight ahead, all the way at the back of the room, with a deep

red curtain at its back, stood a black hexagonal coffin. We headed over to it; then Mei turned silently back to look at me. She stood in such a way that her body hid from my view the doll shut up in the coffin, the doll that looked exactly like her—

She touched her fingers to the eye patch over her left eye.

"I took this off for you once before down here, didn't I?"

"Uh…yeah."

The left eye beneath her eye patch, that I'd seen that day…Of course I remembered it vividly.

A blue eye, empty to all.

She had revealed a blue eye with an artificial spark, exactly like the eyes sunken in the eye sockets of the dolls…

…Why?

And now again, out of nowhere, why…?

Undeterred by my bewilderment, Mei took her eye patch off and then placed her right palm over the right half of her face, covering her right eye for once. The exposed blue eye on her left was all that looked, unswervingly, at me.

"I was four when I lost my left eye." Mei's lips trembled, a pale ghost of her voice filling the room. "I barely remember it. A malignant tumor formed in the eyeball and I had to get it surgically removed…When I woke up one day, my left eye was gone."

Unable to say anything, all I could do was stand there and watch her face closely.

“At first, they tried a bunch of regular artificial eyes to fill the hole. But my mother said none of them were cute enough…So she made a special eye for me. My special ‘doll’s eye.’”

…A blue eye, empty to all.

“You don’t have to hide it, you know.”

Without my meaning to say them, the words came just then and escaped my mouth.

“Even without the eye patch, I think your eye is pretty.”

I startled myself and got flustered saying it, and my heart started to pound almost immediately. I couldn’t really read Mei’s expression as she stood there looking at me, probably because her right hand was covering her right eye.

My left eye is a doll’s eye.

The words Mei had spoken the first time I’d run into her here echoed again in my ears.

It can see things better not seen, so I usually keep it hidden.

All at once, a mysterious foreboding took hold of me.

What does that even mean? At the time, I’d been thrown for a total loop. But what about now? Things were a little different. That thought occurred to me, too.

She could see things better not seen.

Things better not seen…

I wanted to ask exactly what it was that she saw, but I set those

feelings aside for the moment. I had a vague premonition all the while that a day would probably come when I would have to ask her that question.

"I found out later on that when I had the surgery on my eye, I nearly died." Mei's palm still covered her right eye. "The truth is, what happened back then left a mark on me. Do you believe me?"

"Uh, you mean like memories of a near-death experience?"

"Just nightmares of a four-year-old kid sick in bed. It's good enough if you think of them like that."

Despite what she said, I noticed how serious Mei's tone had become.

"I don't think death is very gentle. People talk about 'easy deaths' all the time, but it's not like that. It's dark—darker and lonelier than anything else in the world."

"Dark and lonely…"

"Yeah. But living is exactly the same, right? Don't you think?"

"…Maybe so."

"Ultimately, I'm all I have. Doesn't matter how things were when I was born…I'm talking about the life I'm living and dying every day. You know what I mean?"

What could I say?

"No matter how closely linked people appear to be, we are in fact all alone. Me, my mother…And you, too, Sakakibara."

Then Mei concluded with one last comment: “And her, too—Misaki was the same.”

Misaki? Did she mean Misaki Fujioka?

That was the name of Mei’s **cousin**, who’d died at the municipal hospital at the end of April.

The image of my first encounter with Mei in the elevator of the inpatient ward flowed through my mind with a strange immediacy. As if it had happened only yesterday.

4

Thus June ended and July came upon us.

Thankfully, the result was not a fresh calamity befalling the class as soon as the new month began. But I thought the level of tension permeating the air in the classroom had ramped way up—which was only natural, I suppose.

Two people linked to the class—namely Ms. Mizuno and Takabayashi—had already lost their lives in June. Would there be new deaths now that a new month had begun? **That** would be the crucial test to divine whether this unprecedented “strategy” of increasing the number of students “not there” to two would be effective.

And yet—

The strange life I shared with Mei at school went on just the

same, showing no change on the surface, at least.

In peace and tranquillity that carried with them the threat of never knowing when it might all come crumbling down. But even so, it was all we could have wished for. The solitude, and also the freedom, rested on the cold palm of that peace, reserved for the two of us alone—

In the second week of July, they set the schedule for the end-of-semester exams.

All nine subjects over three days, from the 6th to the 8th. It was a regularly scheduled ritual for ranking the achievements (or lack thereof) of the students in a simple way. Boring, and also depressing.

But finding it—deep down—"depressing" was a first for me, I suspected. And this despite the fact that as one of the students who was "not there," I should have been openly rebelling in this situation, or I could have been all set to go into it totally relaxed. And yet I wasn't.

I knew the reason for it.

I was remembering what had happened during the midterms in May, more than I wanted to. That tragic accident that had befallen Yukari Sakuragi on the last day of exams. The terrible scene I had been unlucky enough to witness that day.

The horrible memories were probably dragging Mei down, too, to some degree or another. This time around, she pretty much never pulled her move of handing in her answer sheet early and leaving the

room. I didn't, either.

Is the new "strategy" working or not?

With that thought in our minds, we couldn't help acting a little more serious than before at school. We were as careful as we could be and worked hard to erase our presence from the class, and everyone else in class continued to collectively ignore us as though we were "not there," even more thoroughly than before.

During July, the enormity of our uneasiness became utterly incomparable with what it had been in June. And the greater our uneasiness became, the harder we prayed for the month to pass us by in peace. I'm convinced that these were thoughts everyone in the class shared.

However, when repeated long enough, a "prayer" also tends to shift and change into a baseless "ritual of the faithful"…

I felt uneasiness, urgency, and also frustration, swelling bigger and bigger as day after day rolled by. And even in the midst of it—no, maybe *because* I was in the midst of it—every so often I would feel inexplicably lighthearted.

This peace and tranquillity.

The solitude and freedom that only the two of us shared.

That if I only wished for this to continue, things would keep on going exactly the same. Of course they would. *Exactly the same… Yeah. For nine more months, right up until it's time for graduation in March next year, just like this, never changing.*

…However.

The reality of the “world” we’d all been sucked into was not so indulgent as to grant that idle fantasy so easily.

The end-of-semester exams concluded without incident and we plowed through the calendar until there was only about a week left before summer break, that day in the third week of July—

The day the peace in the class, which had been so narrowly preserved for a little over a month, ever since Takabayashi’s death on June 6, shattered like glass.

5

July 13. Monday.

Ever since I’d become “not there,” I’d been absent at about nine out of ten of the short homeroom periods in the morning. Usually I would slip in right before the start of first period, and Mei did the same.

But that morning, even though we hadn’t arranged to, the two of us somehow happened to both be in the classroom early. Though of course without talking to anyone or meeting anyone’s eyes.

For the first time in a while, I’d felt up to starting one of my paperbacks, which was open in my lap. It was a collection of Stephen King short stories that I’d never read (for the record, the story I was reading right then was “The Mangler”). More than a month had passed since my up-close experience with a graphic death, and I’d gotten back a tiny bit of my capacity to separate that

kind of novel from reality and enjoy it. That made me feel like a real tough guy, let me tell you…

The end of the rainy season for the region had just been announced the day before.

The weather was beautiful, with not a wisp of cloud in the sky even early in the morning. Fierce sunlight seemed to plead for the true advent of summer. The breeze that blew in through the open windows of the classroom was crisper than the week before and felt much nicer.

Whenever I glanced over to check on Mei, sitting in that same seat all the way at the back next to the windows that faced the schoolyard, she looked like an "apparition" whose outline was smudged by all the light shining in from outside. Just like when I'd first come to this classroom in May…But no: she wasn't an apparition. She was actually, physically there. Had that really been two months ago already?

Slightly after the bell to begin class, the door at the front of the classroom opened and the head teacher, Mr. Kubodera, came in.

He was dressed in the same boring white dress shirt as always. His posture made him seem, like always, somehow ineffectual. *Just like always*...I thought, watching him lazily, when a strange feeling came over me.

A couple of things weren't like always.

Mr. Kubodera always wore a neatly knotted necktie, but not today. For the short homeroom period, he always brought a single

attendance list in with him, but today he had come in protectively clutching a black overnight bag in his arms. Plus, his hair was always neatly parted on one side and gelled, but today it was wild and disheveled…

When I looked at Mr. Kubodera—standing on the teacher's platform and facing us—with these suspicions in mind, something did indeed seem strange. His expression was vacant, somehow. As if he weren't seeing anything, even the things right in front of him. On top of that—

Even from my seat I could see a delicate, intermittent movement on one half of his face.

Twitch…twitch…twitching. As if the muscles were spasming. Did he have a tic? Just from looking, the movement seemed to be of a psychotic, twisted nature.

I don't know how many people besides me had noticed the state their head teacher was in or whether it made them suspicious. We were all sitting at our desks, but a whisper of the previous commotion still lingered in the classroom.

"Everyone—"

Placing both hands on the lectern, Mr. Kubodera began to speak. "Good morning."

His greeting, too, felt odd as soon as I heard it. His voice was strangely tense, just like his face.

Ms. Mikami wasn't with him. I didn't think she was out today, but she didn't show up for every single short homeroom either, so…

“Everyone,” Mr. Kubodera said again. “Today, I need to apologize to all of you. This morning, here where I stand, I owe you all…”

At that, the buzzing in the room faded to silence.

“I’ve asked you all to work hard to make it to graduation in good health next March. I, too, have tried to give my best effort. Unhappy events began occurring in May, but even so I told myself that somehow we would begin again.”

Even as he recited this speech, Mr. Kubodera’s gaze never engaged with his students. His vacant eyes seemed to simply hover in empty space.

He had set the overnight bag he’d brought with him on his desk. As he went on speaking, Mr. Kubodera opened the bag and reached his right hand inside.

“Whatever the future brings is your problem.”

The same tone as if he were reading an example sentence from a textbook. In itself, that wasn’t very different from usual. And yet…

“Is it impossible to stop once it’s begun, no matter what lengths we go to? Or is there a way to put an end to it? I don’t know. I don’t. How am I supposed to know? And actually, what do I care? Ah, I mean, as the head teacher of this class, I am after all obligated to work with you all to overcome these trials without ever bending, to reach graduation next March unharmed. Even at this late date, still I…I still…I…”

A tone not so different from usual.

At that point it began to get more unsettling and his voice became hard to make out. But the very moment I had the thought, an abrupt change went through him. All of a sudden, the words coming out of Mr. Kubodera's mouth broke down. They shattered. That's the only way to express it.

"Angh" and "Ggheh" and "Nkhee" and I don't know what… When I try to transcribe it, it comes out looking like a comic book. But all of a sudden he started making these strange sounds that didn't seem as though they could have come from a healthy human being. All while everyone watched, stupefied, not even trying to decode whatever meaning was in the sounds.

Mr. Kubodera slowly withdrew his right hand from the bag that rested atop his desk.

He was gripping an object that was pretty alien to a middle school classroom.

Something…with a sharp silver blade. A hunting knife or a kitchen knife. Something like that. Even from my seat, I could see it clearly.

Still, we were all struggling to understand what was happening. What was he *doing*, making those weird noises and pulling out a knife like that?

But a mere two or three seconds later, everyone in the class found out the answer to that, like it or not.

Mr. Kubodera thrust his right hand out in front of himself. His fingers curled tightly around the handle of the knife, he bent his

elbow inward. Turning the bladed end on himself. The strange noises that never formed into “words” still rushed from his mouth. And then…

As a tumult began to rise, in front of everyone, Mr. Kubodera produced an incredibly violent, unearthly sound and shoved the knife into his own neck.

The weird noise fluctuated into a bellow.

The commotion transformed into a flock of screams.

A deep, perfectly straight line had been sliced open across the front of his throat and fresh red blood was spraying out. For an instant, the horrendous fountain of blood almost seemed like a bad joke. The students in the seats closest to the platform wound up covered in the spray. Some knocked their chairs over and ran for it, while others seemed frozen, unable to move.

Mr. Kubodera must have sliced open his windpipe along with his artery, because his yell quickly lost the form of a “voice” and mutated into a thick whistling “noise.” The hand that had gripped the knife, his shirt, his face—they were all stained bright red with his own blood.

Even in that state, Mr. Kubodera stayed on his feet, his left hand on the desk to prop himself up. In the bloody mask of his face, his wide, vacant eyes…

A certain spark came into them suddenly and I felt them glare in my direction. A kind of…Yes, it was like hatred.

But it lasted only a moment.

Mr. Kubodera raised his right hand once more and placed the blood-spattered knife against his neck, cutting even deeper.

Bright red blood sprayed without end.

The flesh in the jugular area of his neck was pretty much severed and his head flopped backward. The gaping wound in his neck looked like the wide-open mouth of some inexplicable creature. Still, the knife in Mr. Kubodera's right hand never fell, even as his body shuddered. But then…finally.

He fell.

He started to roll off the teacher's platform.

And then he stopped moving.

The room had fallen pristinely silent at this grotesque spectacle. One second later and the balance had tipped. A muddle of voices began to fill the room in a cresting flood. At that moment, I rose from my seat abstractedly and walked forward to a spot where I could get a good look at Mr. Kubodera's collapsed body.

Tomohiko Kazami was at a desk in the very front row, shaking so badly I could practically hear his seat rattling. There was a spray of blood across the lenses of his glasses, but he neither moved to wipe it away nor to leave his desk. Beside him, a girl had at least managed to move from her seat, but she had sunk immediately to the floor. There was another girl curled over her desk, clutching her head in her hands, who was making a loud, unending shriek. And a boy on all fours making strangled gagging noises…

…Just then.

The door on my right at the front of the classroom banged opened and someone ran in.

Why is he here? I couldn't restrain my surprise. Dressed all in black and his hair as straw-like as ever…It was the librarian, Mr. Chibiki.

"All of you, out of the room!"

Mr. Chibiki must have decided it was too late to mount a rescue as soon as he saw Mr. Kubodera's bloody, crumpled form. He never moved toward the fallen man.

"Just get out of here! Quickly, now!" he ordered the students in a loud voice. Then, turning back to the door he'd come through, he called out, "Ms. Mikami!"

I saw her standing out in the hallway, peering in with a terrified expression.

"Ms. Mikami! I need you to call the police and an ambulance immediately! Please!"

"R-right."

"Is anyone hurt?"

Mr. Chibiki turned to address the students fleeing the room.

"It seems not. I want anyone who feels ill or who's starting to feel worse to speak up. Don't try to hide it. We'll get you to the nurse's office right away."

Next his gaze locked onto me.

“Ah, Sakakibara. Are you…?”

“I’m…fine.” I clenched my stomach tightly and nodded at him. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Let’s get out of here, Sakakibara.”

A voice came out of nowhere from behind my back. *Mei*, I realized immediately.

I turned around and saw that her face was paler than usual. Of course such a random event would upset her. Of course it would, but still…

The body of Mr. Kubodera lay collapsed on the floor, no longer even twitching. As she looked down at him, something about her gaze was reminiscent of the way she looked at the legion of dolls at “Twilight of Yomi”…

“…I guess it didn’t work.” Mei spoke in a whisper. “Even when they upped the number of people ‘not there,’ it didn’t help after all.”

“…I dunno.”

“You two need to leave, too. Go on.”

Mr. Chibiki shepherded us gently out of the classroom, where our eyes met those of several students who’d gone out into the hall ahead of us. Izumi Akazawa, the girl who’d become class representative after Yukari Sakuragi’s death, was there with her entourage around her.

Their faces were whiter than white, and yet as one they glared harshly at me and at Mei. They never said anything. But…

This is your fault.

I felt as if they might hurl the accusation at us any minute.

6

They said Mr. Kubodera's behavior had been suspicious all that morning.

He'd been close-lipped the entire time he was in the teachers' office and hadn't offered the slightest reaction to anyone's greetings. They said he'd looked deeply distracted by something, that he looked like a zombie…

Apparently Mr. Chibiki had run into Mr. Kubodera on the street on their way into school. The two had engaged in the briefest of conversations, and Mr. Chibiki said Mr. Kubodera's behavior at the time was very strange—dangerous, even.

He had offered a refrain of "I'm so tired" and "I'm worn out" in a genuinely pained voice, and had feebly appealed to Mr. Chibiki that "I don't know what to do"…

He had also apparently told Mr. Chibiki, "You understand, at least." Mr. Kubodera had known that Mr. Chibiki was once a social studies teacher at North Yomi, and was also once in charge of third-year Class 3. And then when they parted ways, Mr. Kubodera had said something to Mr. Chibiki in a voice that was barely audible. "I'll need your help when this is over."

Of course, that had nagged at Mr. Chibiki. How could it not? That

was how Mr. Chibiki described it later.

That's why he'd come to the third floor of Building C during the short homeroom: to see how things were going. And when he'd gotten there, he'd heard the screams and weeping of the students in Class 3…

By the time the police and the ambulance crew arrived, Mr. Kubodera had long since passed. They discovered that the knife he'd used was a carving knife he'd brought from home.

"Apparently when the police went to search his home, they found something terrible."

This, too, was information that Mr. Chibiki shared with us later on. He said he'd gotten lots of information out of the police officer who'd come to question him.

"Mr. Kubodera was single and had been living with his mother. She was quite elderly and some years ago she'd suffered a stroke. She'd been largely bedridden since then. Mr. Kubodera wasn't the sort of person who discussed private details of his life, so very few of his colleagues knew his family situation…

"But his mother. When the police went to his home, they said she had passed away in the bed where she spent her days. Not only that —"

Suffocated by a pillow pressed over her face. An obvious murder. That's what they'd found.

She had died late at night on Sunday the 12th or before dawn on Monday the 13th. They were saying that the odds were stacked

toward Mr. Kubodera being the person who'd held the pillow over her face and killed her…

"It must have been caretaker's exhaustion, as they say. He was driven into a mental state that was beyond his capacity to escape, and he wound up murdering his elderly mother. But there were so many options he could have chosen to pursue after that. He could have turned himself in, or he could have tried to hide what he'd done. Or he might have thrown his life away and fled. But in the end, he chose to wait for morning to come, then went to school and deliberately killed himself in front of you all.

"What do you think of his choice? Can you simply write it off as the act of a madman?"

"So you're saying this is another incident that's part of the 'phenomenon'?" When the words came out of me just then, they sounded completely natural. "That Mr. Kubodera was, I dunno—that normally he would have done it without stirring things up so much. So he was dragged into dying like that?"

"I think that interpretation is the correct one in this case. Though of course I have no way to prove it," Mr. Chibiki said with frustration, scratching fiercely at his long, disheveled hair. "Still, considering all the circumstances at play, it's quite lucky that none of the students in the classroom were hurt during the episode."

We were in the secondary library. It was after school on Tuesday, the day after the incident. Mei was with me, but right now she was basically a stone and said pretty much nothing.

"Either way, this means it didn't work." I lowered my voice to spit

out the words that had come too late. “Mr. Kubodera and his mother, since she was a family member **in range**. The two of them wound up being the ‘deaths of July,’ didn’t they?”

“…Yes.”

“So in the end, this new ‘strategy’ of having two people be ‘not there’ was a bust. It didn’t change anything. So the ‘disaster’ that’s started really won’t stop—we really *can’t* stop it?”

“Unfortunately, it seems not…”

With a dismal feeling, my gaze fled from the dim room to the world outside the windows. I caught glimpses of blue sky entering in the wake of the rainy season, the color almost disgustingly free of gloom.

The “disasters” for this year hadn’t stopped.

The torrent of blood spewing from Mr. Kubodera’s neck. The color of it, even now, painted the sky a rich red color. The ghoulish image bubbled up out of nowhere and I closed my eyes tightly, reflexively.

The “disasters” hadn’t stopped.

People were going to keep dying.

Chapter 12

July II

1

I started to have a lot of bad dreams.

I don't remember the details very clearly, so I don't know if it was exactly the same dream every time. But they all had a lot of the same people in them, either Mr. Kubodera, who had just died, or Yukari Sakuragi, who'd died in May after falling down the stairs, or Ms. Mizuno, who'd died in an elevator accident at the hospital in June. A couple of my classmates who were still alive would show up, too, like Izumi Akazawa or Tomohiko Kazami…

Mr. Kubodera would glare at me, his face spattered with blood and both eyes flashing with an intense hatred. Then he would start to speak.

He would proclaim, *It's your fault.*

Sakuragi would rise unsteadily to her feet and yank out the umbrella stabbed so deeply into her throat. Then she would turn to me and declare, *This is your fault.*

Ms. Mizuno did the same thing. The doors to the elevator in the inpatient ward slid open, allowing her to drag herself out.

You did this, you know.

It's your fault. Both of you. This was the merciless condemnation launched from Akazawa's lips. Following close on its heels, the same words came from the mouths of Kazami, Teshigawara, and

Mochizuki.

Stop.

Please, stop—I tried to shout, but no sound came out of me. I couldn't speak.

You're wrong. This isn't my fault—I wanted to deny it, but I…

…I just…

They're right—Somewhere inside myself, I agreed with them. *That's why. That must be why I can't say anything.*

Because of me.

Because I came to this school.

Because I had interacted with Mei, the girl who was "not there." I had violated the "decision" that was meant as a **talisman** to prevent the "disasters." It didn't matter how inevitable my actions had been.

That's why... Because of me, "the 'disasters' for this year" had acted on them. Because of me, they had met such senseless ends…

I would groan in my sleep until it got so hard to breathe that I woke up in the middle of the night. It happened several times a night.

I would kick off the blankets that had grown sticky with sweat, then take several deep breaths, alone in the pitch blackness…

If my lung collapsed again, this time there would be no going back, for sure. The thought struck deep.

2

"Well, whatcha gonna do? Nothing you could have done about it. Don't get so down, Sakaki. You can blame yourself and drag yourself down in the dumps all you want, but it's not gonna change anything."

After Mr. Kubodera's suicide, the first person to start talking to me was—who else?—Teshigawara. He'd gone gung ho back to being the "bleached airhead," in line with the image I'd had of him since the very beginning when I transferred in. He was casually striking up conversations with me about everything under the sun. Despite how completely he'd been ignoring me until just a few days ago…

When I expressed some understandable sarcasm on that point, he replied, "That hurt me, too, dude. All of a sudden we had to start snubbing you, and I couldn't tell you what was going on. How terrible is that?"

Teshigawara gave a bubbling laugh, but his face turned instantly serious.

"You know the situation now, right?" he checked, just to be sure, apparently. "You said that Chibiki guy in the secondary library told you most of the details, right? Then you get it, don't you, Sakaki?"

"Yeah, I totally get it." I turned my eyes from his face and repeated in a low voice, "I get it," then said, "I don't think you had a choice…I mean, what else could you guys have done? I get it."

Since the attempt at increasing the number of kids "not there" to

two hadn't had any effect, there was no need for everyone to keep it going. There was nothing to be gained by continuing to ignore Mei and me. So…

It wasn't just me: there was a transformation in the way everyone in class behaved toward Mei, too, demarcated by Mr. Kubodera's death. Not as if they had discussed the issue and decided to do it. I thought it was probably a more gradual, invisible change.

For example, when this happened—when I was talking to Teshigawara during lunch on Thursday—Mei was at my side. And Teshigawara acted **as if she really existed**, and even addressed one or two comments to her himself.

Teshigawara wasn't the only one. In a reversal of the way everyone had acted up until last week, they had stopped treating Mei as if she were "not there."

However, Mei's personality was not exactly what you would call social, so it was nothing more than a subtle change, one you wouldn't even notice unless you were deliberately looking for it. But still, the news would get around soon and teachers would probably start calling her name in class and calling on her for answers.

Mei Misaki, being treated by all those around her as someone "there."

Of course this was the way things should have been all along. But I actually found it oddly unsettling to see people acting that way…

The third-year Class 3 classroom on the third floor of Building C had been put off-limits immediately as the scene of a violent death.

The class wound up being hastily moved to an empty room in Building B (the ancient desk and chair Mei had been using were left in Building C). And as a solution for the absence of the head teacher, the assistant teacher, Ms. Mikami, would obviously take the position of "substitute head teacher" for the time being, except…

In the room we'd switched to in Building B, the empty seats were strikingly obvious. Maybe that was to be expected. More than half of the class had gone home early the day of the incident—totally understandable. The day after, and the day after that, the number of students who used Mr. Kubodera's death as a reason to stay home from school had risen quite high.

"I mean, sure, I guess."

That was Teshigawara's comment on the situation.

"No one's gonna see something horrible like that and not be affected. I guess anyone with normal nerves probably wouldn't want to come back for a while. If we were still in that room, I'd be gone too, no question."

"Kazami's been out this whole time."

"That guy's been wimpier than anyone else I know, ever since he was a kid. Plus he was in the very front seat. I'm shocked he didn't pass out, actually."

Teshigawara spoke bluntly, but at root it really was affection for his "childhood friend" that he'd be "better off without." With the next breath, he added, "I tried calling him last night, and he actually sounded happy. I couldn't believe it. He said he'll be here

tomorrow."

"I wonder if some people just aren't going to come back until after summer break. It's only a couple more days, after all."

Without a second of hesitation, Teshigawara replied, "No way they're coming back."

Mei had been listening to our conversation in silence, but at that, she murmured, "Some people might have even left town by now."

"Left town?"

Teshigawara's face looked kind of shocked, and Mei gave a slight nod. "Yup. I hear there are plenty of people who do it every year. They get out of Yomiyama for summer break."

"Because the danger doesn't reach outside Yomiyama, you mean? I wonder if that's true."

"According to Mr. Chibiki, there's a pretty good possibility that it is, anyway."

"Hm-m-m. So then, what? The kids who booked it told their families what's going on?"

"Maybe so. But there's that taboo against talking about this stuff, even with your family, so…It's a tough problem."

"Hm-m-m."

The bridge of Teshigawara's nose filled with wrinkles, then he spat, "I don't even know." Then he turned to look at Mei again and said, "Anyway, you really are a weird one, Misaki. You're wrapped up in this, too, but you act all cool about it, like it's someone else's

problem.”

“Do I?”

“It almost makes me think you’re…” Teshigawara trailed off for a few beats there, but in the end he went on in a tone of indifference that sounded pretty deliberate. “Maybe underneath it all, you’re the ‘extra person’ for this year.”

“Me?” A shadow of a smile went through her right eye, the one unobscured by her eye patch. “I don’t think I am, anyway.”

“…Figured.”

“Yeah…But you know, they say the ‘extra person’ hiding in the class doesn’t even know that they’re ‘the casualty.’ So maybe…”

Mei was joking about it now, but when the same topic had come up at her house before, I remembered her flatly telling me something different.

I know that I’m not “the casualty.”

Why was that? How had she been able to say that with such assurance?

The question bugged me.

“But it could in fact be you, Teshigawara,” Mei said with another faint smile. “What do you think?”

“M-me?” Teshigawara reeled, his eyes wide, and he pointed at the tip of his nose. “No way…C’mon, quit joking around.”

“Are you sure there’s ‘no way’?”

“Hey, I’m alive! I’ve got an incredibly healthy appetite for food and for worldly possessions, and I don’t have a clue what I could have ever died from. I’m not trying to brag, but I’ve got super-vivid memories of my whole life, ever since I was a kid.”

Watching Teshigawara’s frantic response, I couldn’t help letting a laugh burst out of me. And yet…

That didn’t mean I was denying the possibility that he could in fact be the “extra person” for this year. Inside, I was working hard to think it over calmly.

Who is “the casualty”...?

Conscious all the time that the question written on Mei’s desk was even more crucial now.

3

Of course, Mr. Kubodera’s sudden death became a topic of conversation at my grandparents’ house in Koike.

Ever since May, my grandmother seemed to always respond to the continuing deaths of people linked to third-year Class 3 by uttering “How frightening” in an effusive loop. When I gave her a quick background on Mr. Kubodera’s suicide, she’d switched to a loop of “How terribly sad.” As usual, I didn’t know how much of the

discussion my grandfather had really understood. Only that whenever he heard the words "death" or "died," he reacted acutely every time. Then he would say, like he had before, "I don't want to go to any more funerals." Or he would suddenly tear up or start weeping quietly…That was how it went.

As for Reiko, she was considerate enough to say, "It must have been such a shock for all of you," but she was consistently tight-lipped about the incident. I suppose that was to be expected, really. I had gotten the message on that, but…

"You can't remember anything from fifteen years ago?"

I couldn't keep myself from asking the question yet again, after all.

"That year you were a third-year in middle school, you said that the 'disasters' had started, and then they stopped partway through the year. Why? What stopped them? Don't you remember?"

No matter how often I asked, however, Reiko would only hang her head morosely.

"You said something happened during summer break. So what was it?"

"…That's a good question." Reiko propped a hand under one cheek and sank into thought. Then, finally, her expression touched by insecurity, she murmured, as if to herself, "That summer… Ritsuko died. But that means staying shut up in the house would have been worse…Right, so I went to the camp on Yomiyama…"

"A camp?"

This was the first I'd heard of it. Unconsciously, I leaned forward.

"You guys had that? Camping over summer break? Like a school trip to the mountains?"

"It wasn't as full-blown as that. It was just our class, I think."

"What's 'the camp on Yomiyama'?"

"I…"

Reiko struggled for an answer. My grandmother had been off to one side, listening to our conversation, but just then she spoke up. "She means **Mount Yomi**, I'm sure."

"…What?"

"Yomiyama was originally the name of a mountain. The mountain came first, and then the town, so the town took its name from the mountain."

Ah…That reminded me—there was a mountain to the north of the town actually called Yomiyama. I remembered hearing about that from Reiko herself. Right—that time she'd come to visit me while I was hospitalized, back in April.

"Do the people here call it that? 'Mount Yomi'?"

"That's right." My grandmother nodded triumphantly. "When we were young, your grandpa and I would hike the mountain all the time. You can see the entire town from the summit, which is quite a lovely view."

"Wow." I turned my eyes back to Reiko. "So you had your camp during summer break at the mountain Yomiyama. A class trip just

for third-year Class 3?"

"…Yeah." Her face hadn't lost its unease. Haltingly, she replied, "At the foot of the mountain, there's this tiny building. The original owner used to go to North Yomi, but he donated it to the school a long time ago. So they used to use it sometimes for camping trips or whatever. When we went, the head teacher recruited people to go and…"

"What happened then?" I asked, piling on. "Did **something happen** at the camp?"

"…I think so, maybe." Reiko dropped her hand from her cheek and gave a slow shake of her head. "I just can't remember. I'm pretty sure that something happened, but then to actually tell you what that was…"

"Oh."

"What a cop-out, right? I'm sorry."

Reiko let out a tortured sigh.

"No, it's okay," I murmured, unable to say aloud the words *Please don't apologize.*

I had all kinds of complex feelings about it, but when I saw Reiko suffering, my heart started to hurt. Plus…

After all, it had been fifteen long years ago, not to mention being an event linked to the "disasters." Since she was directly affected by it, maybe it was inevitable that her memory had gotten so incredibly blurry.

It seemed pointless to keep questioning her right now. Although, slight as it was, I felt as though I'd gotten my hands on a clue.

I would just try asking Mr. Chibiki about it. And maybe get his opinion on it.

With this plan in mind, I told Reiko, "It's fine; don't worry," and pasted on a clumsy smile for her. "Please don't push yourself too hard, Reiko. It's fine."

4

The morning of the 17th, a Friday.

The nightmares had stopped tormenting me the night before. It could have been Teshigawara's assurances, which had come down in a wisecracking tone, or I could have been more relaxed. So I guess I owed him thanks, as things stood right now.

"Sakakibara, wasn't it?"

Someone called to me when I was coming into school that morning, just as I came into sight of the front gate.

It was an unfamiliar man's voice, from up ahead. Caught by surprise, I looked into the man's face. A middle-aged man I'd seen before was coming toward me. A kind smile came over his face and he raised one hand in a friendly gesture.

"Um, you're…" I searched my memory hastily and recalled his name. "Mr. Oba, right? From the Yomiyama Police Department."

“I’m flattered that you remember me.”

After Ms. Mizuno’s accident, two detectives had questioned me in the teachers’ office. He was the older of the two, with a plump, round face.

“Um…Can I help you?”

“Oh, no, I just spotted a familiar face and thought, you know.”

“Are you here about the thing that happened to Mr. Kubodera on Monday? Are you investigating it, too?”

I asked the question flat out.

The smile disappeared from the detective’s round face and he nodded. “Well, yes. You witnessed the incident in the classroom that morning, correct?”

“…Yeah.”

“It must have been a shock. For your teacher to suddenly…”

“Yeah, it was.”

“We’re treating the incident as a suicide. The circumstances don’t allow much room for suspicion. The issue remains the motive for his suicide.”

“I’ve heard rumors. How Mr. Kubodera’s mother was bedridden and he…”

“That’s gotten out already, has it?”

The detective’s lips bent in a rueful arc, but who knows what thoughts were behind it, because he then told me the following

story. In the same overly soothing voice as the last time we'd met.

"After killing his mother, it appears that your teacher spent the time before heading into school sharpening the knife he used to kill himself. Quite vigorously, at that. Signs of the activity were left in his kitchen. It paints a scene much stranger than we had even imagined.

"No matter who we ask, we're told that Mr. Kubodera was an extremely serious, placid man. And then he pursued these acts out of the blue. It's truly odd."

"…Definitely."

What was this detective trying to accomplish by latching onto me in a place like this? What did he want me to tell him? Just then—

"The accidental death of Ms. Sanae Mizuno last month."

Out of nowhere, he spoke her name.

"The accidental death of Ms. Yukari Sakuragi the month before. And her mother's death in a car accident the same day."

"Um, yes?"

"I've looked into all of them, and there's no possible explanation except that they were purely accidental. Since there's no sign of foul play, we have no business sniffing around."

"…Oh."

"And yet—how should I put it? These cases continue to nag at me. I've heard that there was another boy who died last month, although that was from an illness. A student named Takabayashi. It's

a fact that quite a few people all linked to the same middle school class have lost their lives in a very short period of time. Trying to ignore it is a waste of effort. Don't you agree?"

As the detective spoke, his eyes were fixed searchingly on my face. But all I could do was murmur "I mean…" and crane my head to one side.

"I can't shake it from my mind, so I've been making the rounds asking people about it," the detective went on. "Purely out of personal interest."

I stayed silent, and my head stayed tilted to the side.

"In the process, here and there I picked up on a peculiar rumor. They call it 'the curse of third-year Class 3.'"

I didn't say a word.

"You've heard of it, haven't you, Sakakibara? That third-year Class 3 at Yomiyama North Middle is cursed and there are 'cursed years' that roll around on an irregular schedule. In those years, someone linked to the class will die every month. This is one of the 'cursed years,' they say. I thought it was ridiculous, but I looked into it a little, all the same. And when I did, I found that there have been years in the past when quite a lot of students and people with connections to this school really *do* die."

"I…don't know anything about that."

I shook my head firmly, filling the gesture with a note of denial. I wonder how very unnatural a reaction it seemed, however, in the detective's eyes.

“Ah, no…Obviously that’s not enough for me to be able to do anything about this issue. If I tried to tell the other detectives or my boss about this, they’d just laugh me out of the department.”

At that, the gentle smile returned to the detective’s round face.

“Even if we assume that this talk about a ‘curse’ is true, there’s nothing we can do about it. That’s the reality. I just have an individual interest. I’d like to determine what’s true and what’s not, if I can.”

I couldn’t say why, but I felt as if I had understood what was in the man’s heart. And, being me, I couldn’t help giving him my candid opinion.

“Still, Detective, I really don’t think you should get involved in this. It probably won’t help anything to have the police around. And if you’re not careful, you could be putting yourself in danger, too.”

“Someone else gave me the same warning.” The smile on the detective’s round face shifted into a rueful smirk. “I suppose you’re right. It hardly seems likely, but then again…”

Trailing off, the detective rummaged in his pockets. He pulled out a battered business card and handed it to me.

“I may be a useless police officer, but if you ever think I might be able to help, don’t hesitate to get in touch. I’d appreciate if you could call my cell phone. The number’s on the back of the card.”

“…Okay.”

“The fact is, I have a daughter in her fourth year of elementary school.”

The detective added this, last of all.

"If she goes into a public middle school like she's supposed to, then she might wind up at North Yomi. And given that, well, this issue has been nagging at me. I ask myself, what if my daughter is in third-year Class 3 someday?"

"Yeah…" Even as I nodded, I added, "She'll be okay," a completely irresponsible thing to say. "I'm sure the curse will be broken by then. I'm sure…"

5

That day after classes, Mei and I went to the secondary library together. Naturally, we were going to see Mr. Chibiki. Teshigawara and Kazami—back in school starting that day—seemed to want to come with us, but thankfully they decided to hold off. I wanted to avoid too many people coming and having the conversation go all over the place.

"Why, hello. How have you two been?"

The tone and smile Mr. Chibiki greeted us with seemed totally artificial. My mind locked up over how to respond, thinking, *I haven't exactly been great*... But at my side, Mei replied with a demure look on her face, "We're doing fine, thank you. Avoiding bizarre accidents and sudden illnesses."

"Now that there's been a 'death for July,' it seems the 'not there' **game** has come to an end, as well."

“Yes. Although I kind of feel like that’s actually thrown everything off balance somehow.”

“Hm-m-m. I would call it the overall cohesiveness, rather than ‘balance.’ But I suppose you’re right. Everyone is going to be at a complete loss for how to behave going forward, after all.”

At this point, Mr. Chibiki’s face became serious and, returning to his usual tone, stripped of all excess emotion, he said, “Actually, Ms. Mikami came in here today.”

“She did?”

I reacted instantly.

“Is that surprising?”

“Oh, uh, no…”

“She knows my history here, too, so she wanted to have a serious discussion with me.”

“A discussion? Like what she should do now that she’s the substitute head teacher for Class 3?”

“Something like that,” Mr. Chibiki replied ambiguously. Then, without pausing, he turned the question back on us. “What about you two? Did you have something you wanted to discuss with me?”

“Um, yeah.”

I nodded soberly.

“There’s something I wanted to check, and something I wanted to ask.”

“Oho.”

“The truth is…”

Then I told Mr. Chibiki the story.

About “the year when the ‘disasters’ began, but then stopped partway through.” How it had happened in 1983, fifteen years ago when Reiko was in third-year Class 3, and how apparently **something** had happened during a class camping trip over summer break that year. I had already told Mei about it.

“Eighty-three…Yes, I believe that was indeed the year.”

Pushing the bridge of his glasses up his nose, Mr. Chibiki slowly closed his eyes and then opened them again.

“The single year in these last twenty-five when it stopped partway through.”

Then he pulled the binder with the black cover out of a drawer on his side of the counter. It was the binder with the class lists for the past third-year Class 3s.

“First of all, let’s take a look at this.”

He held it out to us. It was already open to the page for 1983.

Like in all the others, *X*s had been written in red pen next to several of the names that ran down the page. These were the students who’d died. Notes on the date and **how they had died** were in the space to the right. I saw a couple of cases where the students themselves had been fine, but a member of their family had died. But there was no mention of the death of Reiko’s older sister, Ritsuko.

“There were seven victims that year, not including Ritsuko, whom I never found out about.” Mr. Chibiki added this explanation as he peered across the counter at the file. “Two in April, one in May, one in June, one in July, and two in August. You said Ritsuko died in July, I believe? So then there were two in July, and eight total. As you can see, there were no more deaths after that, starting in September. Meaning…”

“It stopped in August.”

“Correct. Take a look at the date of death for the ‘deaths of August.’”

I did as I was told. And what I discovered was…

Both of the people who’d died in August were students in Class 3. Moreover, the two of them had both died on the same day: August 9. The way they’d died was also the same: “Accident.”

“Two students died on the same day in an accident…”

The **link** was easy to see.

“Was this on the camping trip over summer break?”

Mr. Chibiki nodded without a word, so I went on, “Some sort of accident happened on the trip, and the two of them died. But during the same trip, **something** happened that made the ‘disasters’ for that year stop…”

“If you look at the space at the bottom of the page, the name of ‘the casualty’ isn’t written there, is it?” Mr. Chibiki said, directing my attention. I looked and saw that, indeed, there was nothing written there. “I wasn’t able to confirm who the ‘extra person,’ or in

other words ‘the casualty,’ was for that year. Since the ‘disasters’ stopped partway through, I wonder if perhaps the ‘extra person’ disappeared without waiting for graduation. And maybe the traces of his or her presence that year had also disappeared at the same time. There was no precedent for the situation, so I didn’t know what was going on, either. By the time I sensed that’s what may have happened and did my research, the memories of those involved had already faded and there was no one left who remembered the name of the ‘extra person.’”

“Hm-m-m.”

I pressed a hand to my forehead and mulled over this information, while beside me Mei asked, “But, in any case, it is true that the ‘disasters’ for that year ended in August, right?”

“That’s right.”

“The major question is why—and how—did they stop?”

“Right.”

“You’re saying you still don’t really understand the ‘why’?”

“Not clearly, no. All I know is at the level of rumor or conjecture.”

“Rumor or conjecture?” I asked. “Saying what?”

Mr. Chibiki creased his brow in a pained look as he ran his palm over his straw-like hair.

“Just as you said a few moments ago, Sakakibara—the camping trip took place at the overnight facility belonging to the school at the

foot of Yomiyama."

"Is that facility still there?"

"It's been maintained. The building is called the 'Sakitani Memorial Hall,' and it's still used from time to time for club camping trips and that sort of thing. Though I'm sure it must be quite dilapidated by now. Incidentally, there's an old shrine partway up the slope of Yomiyama."

"A shrine?"

"It's also named after the mountain: Yomiyama Shrine."

"Yomiyama Shrine…" I murmured, looking over at Mei. She nodded without a moment's thought. I could see she already knew that the place existed.

"During the camping trip, everyone went to visit that shrine, they say. Apparently it was the head teacher's idea."

"When you say they visited the shrine…" I tilted my head to one side. "You don't mean there was some kind of divine intervention, do you?"

"Some people make that claim, actually." Mr. Chibiki's tone was cold. "'Yomiyama' was also the last name of that boy Misaki who died twenty-six years ago, after all. Not to mention that people have long suggested that the mountain's name could have come from 'Yomi,' the name for the land of the dead. Yomiyama as the Mountain of Yomi. There are even oral traditions that claim the shrine built there is—how shall I say—a 'linchpin' separating this world from the next. That must have inspired the head teacher at the

time to make the suggestion."

"And that's why the 'disasters' stopped?"

"That's what some people say. Didn't I say that?"

"But then, wouldn't that mean all someone would have to do in an 'on year' is visit the shrine?"

"Indeed. And naturally, there appear to have been people who had the same thought in subsequent years," Mr. Chibiki informed us, his voice still cold. "It seems, however, that it had no effect."

"So then…"

"That's why I say it's 'at the level of rumor or conjecture.' In the end, I don't completely know why or how they did it."

"So you're saying the visit to the shrine didn't change anything?"

"No, you can't draw such a conclusion so easily."

"Meaning what?"

"Visiting the shrine may be a 'condition.' Or, for example, it's also plausible that visiting the shrine had an effect because more than a certain number of people went in the first part of August, before the Obon Festival."

"I guess that's true."

"Though of course we can't deny the possibility that it was **something else**." Mr. Chibiki fixed his gaze on my face, then shot a glance in Mei's direction before continuing. "When Ms. Mikami came by today, this is actually what we talked about. Why and how

the ‘disasters’ stopped fifteen years ago. We went over much of the same ground as we’ve just done, and she seemed to think of several things on her own. She was nodding and tilting her head all the time, and at the end she kept saying ‘I see’ and ‘So that’s what that was.’ It sounded like she was talking to herself…”

Mr. Chibiki cut himself off for a moment, and then went on: “Given how she was acting, there may be a similar camping trip this August.”

Then he fixed his eyes on my face again.

“She had some bitter experiences two years ago, as well. Considering that she’s been appointed the substitute head teacher after Mr. Kubodera’s death, she must be desperate for a solution.”

I could offer no response. I heard a quiet sigh from Mei. Mussing his hair, Mr. Chibiki said, “Assuming that’s what happens, the question then is: how many students will participate?”

6

“I have an announcement for everyone. I know it’s short notice, but I’ve arranged a class camping trip next month from the eighth to the tenth, for two nights and three days. It will be at Yomiyama’s…”

Tuesday of the following week, on July 21. It had been as hot as a steam bath in the gym, where the assembly to close the first semester had been held. After we’d returned to the classroom, during the final homeroom before summer break—

Just as Mr. Chibiki had predicted, these words came from the mouth of our substitute head teacher, Ms. Mikami.

At this hour on this day, there weren't even twenty students in the room. Some people had been out of school ever since Mr. Kubodera's death, while others had come back once, only to leave again. Of these, some might have gotten their families' understanding or cooperation and beat feet out of town, as Mei had suggested.

There was a low-pitched murmur in the classroom at the sudden announcement of the camping trip. The turmoil in the buzzing exchange of students' voices could clearly be heard: *Why does she want to do this over summer break?* From their perspective, not knowing the reasons behind it, I suppose it was a natural reaction.

"I'd like you to think of this as a very important ritual," Ms. Mikami said, not even attempting to quiet the commotion. "This is a very important ritual…It's not mandatory, but I would appreciate the participation of those students who are able to come. Are there any questions?"

She didn't broach any further details.

A class camping trip, to the same location and on the same days as the trip taken by third-year Class 3 fifteen years ago. If we all visited the shrine on Yomiyama during the trip, maybe the "disasters" for this year would stop. She had decided to have the camping trip, and yet maybe she was hesitant to make an announcement quite like that here in the classroom.

Standing atop the teacher's platform, Ms. Mikami's expression

seemed incredibly tense—maybe she was nervous. From another perspective, her gaze seemed utterly vacant somehow, too.

I tried hard to guess at how she truly felt, despite my own agitation, but…

"I'll send you all a handout with the details in the next few days. A permission slip will be included, so please return your slips to me by the end of this month if you'd like to participate. Any questions?"

That wound up being the sum of the explanation we got about the camping trip. A couple of hands went up to ask questions, but the way she handled them, they were as good as ignored…

…In any case.

This was how I—how we—went into our summer break. The summer break that would be our last in middle school—and ripe with the possibility that it might be the last of our lives.

Interlude III

Did you get the handout for the camping trip?

Yeah, it came today.

What are you gonna do? Are you going?

Are you kidding? No way.

But Ms. Mikami told us it's **a very important ritual**…

Come on, it's not like it's a crash course for test prep or something, you know?

On the handout it says "Goal: To strengthen the bonds of the class."

What does that even mean? Why are they pulling something like this over summer break in an "on year"? **Some people already left 'cause staying in Yomiyama is too dangerous.** If we got into some kind of accident because we went on this camping trip…

…Still.

The safest thing to do is to not go anywhere. Just shut yourself up in your house.

Maybe so…

The outside world is full of danger, you know?

…

Still, why did this have to happen to us? It makes no sense at all. And what a waste of a summer break.

…Yeah.

If that transfer student hadn't started talking to Misaki, you *know* the **talisman** would have worked, too.

…Maybe, yeah.

I think the tactical officers are at fault here, too. If they'd handled things right from the start…They could've explained to the transfer kid what was going on before he came to school or something.

Yeah. But it doesn't do much good complaining about it now.

I guess. We didn't believe people were actually going to die like they did, either, I suppose…

Seriously. I never thought things would turn out like this…

* * *

The instruction sheet came for that camping trip.

Yeah.

What are you gonna do?

Oh, I'm…uh…

You're not going?

Er…no.

Hey there, Mr. Class Representative, you're a tactical officer, too, aren't you? Aren't you kind of obligated to go?

Uh…But I…

You scared? You think something's gonna happen on this trip?

No, it’s not that. I…

I heard this is actually effective.

Wha—? What do you mean?

I heard this camping trip really means something. Ms. Mikami even said it’s a very important ritual. And actually, I talked to Sakaki about it after class, and he told me…

* * *

The eighth to the tenth. Those are the same dates as the camping trip fifteen years ago, right?

Yes, that’s right.

Are we going to visit the Yomiyama Shrine, too?

That’s the plan, at least.

On the second day? The ninth?

That seems to be when they went fifteen years ago.

But fifteen years ago, there was an accident that day and…

I know. Mr. Chibiki showed me his binder. But, you know, **since we’re giving this a try, I think we need to do everything we can to match the conditions from before**.

So then why didn’t you explain that to everyone after the end-of-semester assembly?

Well, because…I didn’t feel confident enough.

…

I wasn't sure if this really was an "important ritual." Or if this would be capable of stopping the "disasters" for this year. Or how much hope I should let myself have. I struggled with it…So that's all I could manage at the time.

So you're not struggling with it anymore?

…I don't know.

…

I don't know, but if there's even a slight chance this might work, that's better than to keep doing nothing…That's how I feel about it.

* * *

Maybe I'd better go on that camping trip after all.

Why are you bringing that up again?

Somehow I keep thinking, **maybe it'll save us**.

You think it might…save us?

I heard a rumor about it. I mean, there's that shrine on Yomiyama, right? They're going there on the camping trip, and they're going to do a purification ritual.

Really?

And there was a class a long time ago that got saved.

Are you serious?

I just heard the rumor.

Hm-m-m…

So what are you gonna do?

Who do you think is going?

Akazawa said she's going. She said it's her responsibility as a class representative and a tactical officer. Sugiura's going, too.

Sugiura is *so* Akazawa's right hand, don't you think?

I think Nakao's going, too.

What, to get in with Akazawa?

Totally! *Oh, my queen, I shall accompany you!*

There's just something pitiful about that guy.

Speaking of, isn't Mochizuki going, too? He's in it for Ms. Mikami, though.

He is so obvious. And of course Sakakibara's going…

I wonder if Misaki is.

Who knows…

If she's going, I don't think I want to.

But it doesn't matter anymore, remember? **The *talisman* of her being "not there" is over now.**

That's true. But c'mon, don't you think she's kind of, I don't know…hard to be around? I feel like she looks at people so coldly.

You can't handle that?

It's not that I can't handle it, it's just creepy…

…

…

…Back in elementary school, there was a girl in my class who looked a lot like her.

You mean Misaki?

Yeah.

But isn't she an only child?

She had a different last name. But I'm pretty sure her first name was Misaki.

Wo-o-ow.

Sometimes I still wonder if they're actually the same person…

Where did she go to middle school?

She moved away in fifth year. So I dunno.

Did she wear an eye patch?

I…**don't think she did.**

I heard Misaki lost her left eye when she was four.

Really? Then I guess…

Chapter 13

July III

1

I started having bad dreams again.

Different from the nightmares I was getting before. In these, I wasn't blaming myself for the "disasters" starting and telling myself it was "all my fault"…

Who is "the casualty"...?

Dreams where I was alone in the dark, that question repeating constantly.

Who is "the casualty"...?

In answer to the question, different people's faces appeared, one after another.

Kazami. Teshigawara. Mochizuki. The guys I had kind of hung out with since transferring here.

Maejima from the kendo club. Mizuno/Little Brother. Wakui, who sat at the desk in front of me. Akazawa. Sugiura. Nakao. Ogura…The boys and girls that I wasn't on great terms with, but

whose names I could match to a face with confidence.

And then…There was Mei.

And my other classmates from third-year Class 3—there were a lot of them. Which one of them was the "extra person" / "casualty" for this year?

Their faces, bobbing up from the darkness in random order. One by one, the contours of their faces would break apart into goop, then morph into something ghoulish that gave off a rotten stench. Like the standard-issue scary faces done with special effects makeup from every horror movie ever. And then…

The face that always appeared last of all was none other than mine —the face of Koichi Sakakibara.

My own face, seen only in mirrors and photos. Its contours broke apart goopily and I saw a ghoulish face more terrifying than any in this world…

…Me?

Was I…?

Could I be "the casualty" who'd snuck into the class and not even realize it myself? Impossible.

Raking my hands over my caved-in face, giving voice to an unsettling moaning sound…That's where I would wake up. And that happened every single night…

I couldn't actually be "the casualty," could I?

I tried to challenge the possibility with anything I could think of.

"The casualty" doesn't realize that they're "the casualty." He or she exists because of the corruption/modification of memories that tells them "I'm not dead. I'm alive, like I always have been." In which case…

Doesn't that mean it's possible that **it's me**?

At the beginning of April this year, there were enough desks and chairs in the classroom. Then May started and they were short one set. Because I transferred in partway through.

I was the student who had unexpectedly **bumped the class up by one**. And if that meant that I was the "extra person" / "casualty" for this year…

Maybe I just wasn't aware of it and had died last year, say, or the year before, and my grandparents and Reiko and my father and everyone else was forgetting that fact, and all the records had been doctored so that the details matched up…

…Hold on a second.

I shook my head firmly, and then pressed my palm against my chest. And so, verifying the steady beat of my heart, I calmed down and thought things over.

The fundamental rules governing the "extra person" / "casualty" that Mr. Chibiki and Mei had talked about.

"The casualty" for each year appeared at random from among the people who had lost their lives in the past to the "phenomenon" that had begun twenty-six years ago in third-year Class 3.

The range for the "disasters" was restricted to members of the class and their blood relatives within two degrees. However, even when a person is within that range, if they're in a location away from Yomiyama, they're not a target.

How did I look, in light of this rule?

In order to lose my life to this phenomenon, I would have to have lived in this town at least once before in my life. And then either I would have to have been in third-year Class 3 at North Yomi myself, or someone within two degrees of me would have had to. But that wasn't the case.

When my mother was in third-year—I know this goes without saying, but—I didn't exist yet. When Reiko was in third-year, I was born in this town in the spring of that year, but the connection between Reiko and me was aunt to nephew, which is three degrees. So that means I was outside the range of the "disasters." Even if it extended to my mom, Ritsuko, it shouldn't have affected me…

In July, fifteen years ago, my mother died; and I, her only child, spent the rest of my life in Tokyo with my father. Without the slightest connection to third-year Class 3 at North Yomi. Then, this April, I'd started my last year of middle school and come to this town for the first time…

…It's impossible.

Vmmmm…A mystifyingly deep, low-frequency sound revved up. *What's that?* A momentary flash of anxiety went through me, but even that vanished soon enough.

It's impossible, I reassured myself.

It was, indeed, impossible for me to be "the casualty."

I was certain that Kazami and Sakuragi had assured themselves of that in our conversation that day when they'd come to visit me at the hospital.

Yes, their questions that day had been…

Is this your first time living in Yomiyama?

I just thought maybe you'd lived here, even if it was a long time ago.

Did you ever stay for very long?

I had thought the questions were kind of strange, but that was how the two of them had felt out the possibility that I, the new transfer student, might be "the casualty."

And at the end of it all, Kazami had asked to shake my hand.

"That was part of the **test**, too."

Mei had told me that. That was before summer break had started.

"If you shake hands with 'the casualty' the first time you meet them, their hand is supposed to be incredibly cold. That's what people say. But I heard the story is kind of suspect. Mr. Chibiki says it's just one of the lame embellishments that got tacked on later, and there's not much credibility behind it."

But suppose I actually was "the casualty" for this year and that Kazami and Sakuragi had realized it that day. What had they been

planning to do about it?

Mei gave the answer to this question that had gripped me.

“If that had been the case, I think that once you came to school in May, they would have made you the one ‘not there’ instead of me.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. And everyone would ignore the ‘extra person’ who shouldn’t have been there in the first place. There would be a nice symmetry in that. ’Cause that’s got to be way more effective than making some random person ‘not there’ instead.”

“And then the ‘disasters’ wouldn’t happen?”

“Probably not.”

“So then…” I hit her with a new question that had risen all on its own. “What if we eventually find out who ‘the casualty’ is? If we started treating them like they’re ‘not there’ right away…”

“I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t work.”

Mei shot me down blithely.

“The ‘disasters’ have already started. So no matter how we try to bring things into balance now, it’s too late.”

2

It was the fourth day of summer break, the night of July 25, when I spoke to my father Yosuke in far-off India for the first time in quite

a while.

“Hey, there. You’re on summer break now, aren’t you? How are you doing?”

The first words out of my father’s mouth were as carefree as ever, since he was ignorant of everything going on.

“I’m doing okay, I guess.”

And I replied in the same tone I always did. I had the feeling that it wouldn’t be right to tell him about what was going on here. There was also the fact that I didn’t think it would accomplish anything even if I did tell him.

“Incidentally, Koichi, do you know what the day after tomorrow is?”

When he asked me that, my heart skipped for a second. But I did my best to answer as if it was nothing.

“Wow, so you remembered, huh?” I retorted.

My father’s voice got ever so slightly louder. “Of course I did.”

The day after tomorrow—July 27—was the anniversary of her death. My mother, Ritsuko, who had died fifteen years ago in this very town.

“You’re in Yomiyama right now, aren’t you?” my father asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to go back to Tokyo?”

“Are you telling me to go visit her grave for you, all by myself?”

“No, I’m not saying you should do anything extravagant. We didn’t set anything up ahead of time anyway.”

“Yeah. I was wondering what I should do, too…”

My mother’s remains weren’t in Yomiyama: they were kept in the Sakakibara family grave in Tokyo. Every year, my father and I had gone to visit her grave together. As far back as my memories went, we’d never once missed a year.

“I was thinking about going back home by myself, even if it’s just for a couple days…”

I had also tried to think up a way to stay in Tokyo the whole summer break, not “just for a couple days.” Because if that got me out of Yomiyama, I wouldn’t have to worry about calamities befalling me during that time, at least. And yet—

“I don’t think I’m going to, though,” I told him. “Mom was born here, after all, and this is where she died. So I figure I don’t need to go all the way to Tokyo just to visit her grave.”

“That’s certainly true,” my father backed me up instantly. “Say hi to your grandma and grandpa for me. I’ll call them myself soon.”

“Okay.”

The reason I wasn’t going back to Tokyo for summer break. The biggest one was…Maybe it really was because of Mei. I couldn’t help feeling some resistance to the idea of leaving her behind in this town while I got myself “out of range.”

Another reason was that I kept thinking about the class camping trip in August. Wasn’t I obligated to go and be involved in **anything**

that would put a stop to the "disasters"? That feeling was getting stronger, though only half-articulated.

"Hey, Dad?" I'd thought of something, the one issue I wanted to take this chance to ask him about, and I changed my tone slightly. "Can I ask you about Mom?"

"Hm? She was a beauty, your mother was. And she had excellent taste in men."

"That's not what I…"

The last time I'd talked with my father, I had touched on the subject of third-year Class 3 at North Yomi, but it didn't seem to trigger any memories for him. Did that mean that my mother had never talked to him about "the curse of third-year Class 3"? Or maybe that she had told him, but he'd forgotten? There was no way I could know which it was.

"Have you ever seen a picture of Mom from middle school?"

I could almost sense my father cocking his head at my question on the other end of the call. "Weren't you asking about Ritsuko's time in middle school before, too?"

"I'm going to the same school she did, so I guess it just…"

"I'm pretty sure she showed me her graduation yearbook when we were engaged. Her high school one, too, I think. She was a beauty, your mother."

"Are those yearbooks in Tokyo?"

"Yeah. Though they're probably in storage."

“Are there any other photos?”

“Hm?”

“Any other photos of Mom besides her yearbook. Did she leave any photos from when she was in middle school?”

“I don’t think I threw any away…But were there any photos of her in middle school besides the yearbook? Hm. She wasn’t really the type to treasure photos like that.”

“So then—” I had to force the question out. “You never saw that picture? The one showing everyone in her class on the day she graduated from middle school?”

“Well, now…”

There was a silence that lasted several seconds. The signal crackled faintly, *kkssh*. Finally—“What about it?”—came my father’s wary reply.

I stuttered, “Um-m-m…I mean, I heard it was kind of a weird picture. Like, a paranormal photo or something.”

“A paranormal photo?” My father’s voice sounded ever so slightly annoyed. “I don’t know how a rumor like that got started, but really, Koichi. You’re taking something like that seriously? I didn’t think you would fall for talk about paranormal photos…”

“No, I just…I mean…”

“…Hm?”

And then my father’s tone changed.

“Hold on. Wait a second, Koichi. Hm-m-m. Now that you mention it, maybe Ritsuko did tell me something along those lines a long time ago.”

“Really?” My grip on the phone tightened. “What did she say?”

“She told me she had a disturbing photograph. Showing a ghost or something like that. And…right—from when she was in middle school…”

“Did you ever see it?”

“No.” My father lowered his voice dramatically. “I just tuned it out, mostly. I didn’t say I wanted to see it or ask her to show it to me or anything. Besides, she said she hated having it nearby, so she’d left it at her parents’ house.”

“Here?” I squeaked inadvertently. “You’re saying it’s in this house?”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s still there.”

“Right…sure.”

As I replied, I thought, *I have to ask Grandma about this.*

Maybe it was in the room my mother had used before she got married, or maybe it had been put away in storage. Somewhere like that. Or maybe her old stuff was still around. And maybe it would have…

“Hey, Koichi, has anything strange happened out there?” my father asked. I guess he must have picked up on my weird behavior.

“Nope, nothing. Everything’s fine,” I replied instantly. “Just, you

know, it's a little boring, I guess. Oh—but I've got a couple friends here, and next month we're going on a class camping trip, so there's that."

"…I see."

My father's tone was unusually reserved.

"Your mother really was a captivating person, you know. My feelings for her haven't changed in the slightest, even now. So, you know, Koichi, you're very…"

"I know, I know."

Unnerved somehow, I cut him off. If he were about to tell me, "I love you, son," I would have to start worrying that the heat in India had started to affect his brain or something.

"I'll talk to you later," I said. And, as my thumb was feeling for the button to end the call on my cell phone, I added lightly, "Thanks, Dad."

3

Teshigawara called to summon me—"We need to talk. Can you come meet me in a few minutes?"—early the next week. On the afternoon of the anniversary of my mother's death, of all things.

I was kind of reluctant to agree right away, which made Teshigawara toss off a flip comment. "What, you got a date with Mei?" *What an airhead—or maybe just a flip-flopper*...But I guess

by now I totally understood his reasons, and I couldn't really work up the energy to gripe about it.

The place he'd told me to meet him was a café near school called "Inoya." It was over in the Tobii area. I don't know why, but he said Mochizuki was with him.

He wanted to talk to me in person about whatever this issue was. If I actually did have a date, I should bring her along, since this was something that concerned everyone in the class…That was as much as he told me, so how could I not go?

I got directions to the place and left the house without any further ado.

Under the blazing sun of true summer, I made my way to Tobii on the bus. Then, dripping in sweat, I followed the directions Teshigawara had given me. It probably took me close to an hour to get there. And then, on the first floor of a building that stood facing a road running alongside the Yomiyama River, looking a little too fashionable for the area, was "Inoya." Apparently the place was a café by day and sold alcohol at night.

Desperate to escape the heat, I rushed inside. As soon as the relief of the moderate air-conditioning hit me—

"'Sup. We've been waiting for you, Sakaki."

Teshigawara lifted a hand and waved me over to the table where the two sat. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a garish pineapple motif. Let me be clear: it was tacky.

Mochizuki, who was sitting in the seat across from Teshigawara,

looked up at me as I walked over, then quickly dropped his eyes again, seemingly embarrassed. He was wearing a white T-shirt. It had a big picture on the front of it, so for a second I thought, *A Scream T-shirt?* but the picture was of a mustachioed man's face, which I felt like I'd seen somewhere before.

Before I even had time to think, *Man, who is that?* I made out the letters running diagonally below, brushing the mustachioed man's chin.

Salvador Dalí

Hm-m. He's less obsessive than I thought.

I lowered myself into a chair next to Mochizuki and took a quick look around the room. Contrary to the building's exterior, the decor was plain. I guess kind of a retro feel. The music they had playing was some jazzlike, slow, instrumental song that, as usual, I was utterly unable to place. Yeah—I didn't mind this place at all.

"Welcome to Inoya."

A girl in her mid-twenties came over immediately to take my order. Her bartender's clothes and her long, straight hair seemed to blend seamlessly into the look of the café.

"You're one of Yuya's friends, too, huh?" She gave a smooth bow. "I'm sure you're keeping my little brother out of trouble."

"Huh?!"

“I’m his big sister. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, right. Uh, I’m…”

“Sakakibara, right? Yuya’s told me about you. What can I get you?”

“An iced tea, I guess. Made with lemon tea, please.”

“Got it. Make yourself at home.”

According to the explanation I got later, she and Mochizuki really were siblings, with more than ten years’ difference in their ages, but they had different mothers. His sister, named Tomoka, was the daughter of Mochizuki’s father’s previous wife, who had passed away. A couple years ago, Tomoka had gotten married and changed her name to Inose.

So “Inoya” was the shop run by the man she’d married. Tomoka mainly ran things during the day and Mr. Inose ran things at night, and this broad division was how they were making things work.

“Plus it’s close to school and they give Mochizuki’s friends special treatment. That’s why I come here sometimes. And when I do, there’s a pretty good chance I’m gonna see Mochizuki. Isn’t that right?”

Mochizuki answered Teshigawara with a quiet “Yeah.”

“So, anyway: the reason you’re here.” Teshigawara straightened his hunched posture. “You tell him, Mochizuki.”

“Oh…okay.”

Mochizuki wet his lips with his glass of water, then

—"Whew…"—let out a long breath. "Me and Tomoka—even though we have different mothers, we're still related by blood…So, you know, there's a chance that she might get pulled into our problems."

"When you say 'our problems,' you mean the 'disasters' this year for third-year Class 3?"

Mochizuki gave a firm nod at my clarification, then continued. "So I…I couldn't keep it a secret from her."

"You told her what's going on?"

"…Yeah."

"All the details, right?"

That was Teshigawara.

"Yeah. Most of them."

"Tomoka was…" Teshigawara shot a sideways look at the counter where she stood. "She came out of North Yomi for middle school, too. She said she wasn't in Class 3, but she still heard some disturbing rumors about it. That's why when Mochizuki told her the situation, she took him seriously right from the start."

"A couple people really did wind up dying, too. She's worried about me and everyone else in class."

As he spoke, Mochizuki's cheeks flushed a faint pink. *So that's it, huh, kid? That's where your taste for older women comes from, eh?*

"But it's not like this problem is going to go away just because

she's worrying. The 'disaster' doesn't stop once it's begun. No matter what we do, it's…"

"So Mochizuki told his sis about our situation and the camping trip next month."

"…Okay."

"It was during that conversation." Teshigawara straightened his posture again. "*Some new information* has recently come out. Via Tomoka."

4

Katsumi Matsunaga.

That was the person who had brought the "new information."

He'd graduated from Yomiyama North Middle in 1983. Meaning he'd been there at the same time as Reiko. And to top it off, he'd been in the same class as her during their third year: he'd been a part of Class 3.

After graduating from a local high school, he'd gone to college in Tokyo. After his college graduation, he'd worked at some midsized bank, but then gave it up after a couple years. After that, he'd come back to his parents' home in Yomiyama and had stayed to help out with the family business.

This person just happened to be a frequent customer at Inoya.

"He comes a couple times a week. I knew he'd gone to North

Yomi, but I only found out he'd been in third-year Class 3 at the start of this month."

At this point, Tomoka told the story to me firsthand, since I'd just gotten there.

"I've heard all sorts of stuff from Yuya, so I decided I would just ask about it myself. I asked Mr. Matsunaga if there was an 'extra person' hiding in his class during his year. He'd had a lot to drink by that point. He acted kind of startled, and then…"

He'd sat at the bar drinking, never answering Tomoka's question either "yes" or "no," until suddenly he cradled his head in his hands. Then at last, in a halting stutter, the story started to pour out of him without any further prompting. It went like this:

"The 'curse' that year…It was because…

"It…wasn't my fault.

"I didn't do anything wrong…

"Because of me, everyone…

"…I saved them. I *saved* them!

"I wanted to tell someone.

"I felt obligated…

"…I left it there.

"I hid it…

"I hid it, in the classroom…"

His tongue thick in his mouth and his voice a groan…

After that, he got so thoroughly drunk that he fell into a stupor, and he left the shop without another word.

"I don't get it. What does that mean?" I asked, the words coming unbidden.

Tomoka angled her head to one side, looking troubled. "I'm not really sure.

"What I just told you happened one night last week, and Mr. Matsunaga's been back here a couple of times since then. Whenever he comes in, I try to bring it up with him, but he doesn't remember it at all."

"What he said, you mean?"

"Right. No matter how many times I ask, he just gets this blank look on his face and tells me he doesn't know."

We were silent.

"I get the impression that he remembers the fact that 'disasters' brought about by a 'curse' kept happening fifteen years ago in third-year Class 3. But of course the essential questions, like who the 'extra person' was for his year or why the 'disasters' stopped that year, he doesn't remember at all."

"Do you think he might know and he's just hiding it?"

"It doesn't look that way."

Tomoka cocked her head once again.

"He was so drunk that night, maybe he just happened to recall a

shadowy memory of **something**. That's more the feeling that I get."

After a certain point, the victims' memories involving "the casualty" for that year grow faint and disappear. Almost certainly, that's what had happened to this former student, Mr. Matsunaga.

Now, fifteen years after the fact, perhaps a fragment of memory had reawoken at a random moment in his drunken mind. And that? No one could definitively state that it was impossible. That was my opinion.

"There's something about this story, right?" Teshigawara asked, looking into my face.

"It totally gets into your head, right?" he asked, turning next to look at Mochizuki's face.

Mochizuki lowered his eyes and I, biting down on the straw in my glass of iced tea, replied, "Definitely."

That made Teshigawara nod solemnly and say, "I don't mind going on this camping trip and asking the gods for help, but I dunno about just hiding in a corner until then, you know?"

"…Meaning what?"

"Doesn't Tomoka's story kind of give you an idea? What was that guy Matsunaga trying to tell her?"

"So what's your idea?"

"I'm saying, he told her 'I saved them,' right? He said he saved everybody. But in order to pass that information on, he left 'it' behind."

“He hid it in the classroom?”

“Right. He left it behind secretly—meaning no one knows where it is. I have no idea what ‘it’ is, but you gotta know it’s **something** tied to the ‘curse’…It really gets into your head, right?”

“When you put it like that, sure.”

“See? See?” Then, his face earnest, Teshigawara said, “We should go look for it.”

I let out a loud “We should *what?*” and looked over to see Mochizuki’s reaction. His head was bowed, his body hunched and small. I looked back at Teshigawara and mildly asked, “When you say ‘we,’ who are you talking about?”

“I mean us,” Teshigawara said. His expression suggested the answer was obvious. Though it wasn’t entirely clear just how deeply he’d thought out this suggestion. “You, me, and Mochizuki. After all, he got the info out of Tomoka in the first place.”

Still curled into a tight ball, Mochizuki gave a grandiose sigh.

“I want to get Kazami in on this, too, but as serious as he looks, it’s all an act. He’d be a quivering baby about something like this. Hey, Sakaki, why don’t you invite Mei?”

I pursed my lips indignantly and glowered at Teshigawara. “Would you give it a rest already?”

That's what I said, but…

Just over an hour later, I found myself at the doll gallery "Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi" in the town of Misaki. I'd called Mei's house after leaving "Inoya" and parting ways with Teshigawara and Mochizuki. I'd gotten into a frame of mind that made it impossible not to.

Kirika was the one who answered. Just like that first time I'd called a month and a half ago, her voice sounded slightly surprised—or uneasy—but when I told her my name, she acknowledged me right away—"Oh, it's you, Sakakibara"—and handed the phone to her daughter.

"I'm out near the school," I told Mei, donning as casual an attitude as I could manage. "Do you mind if I come by your house?"

Without even asking why I wanted to come over, she replied, "Sure. Let's meet in the basement of the gallery again. There probably won't be any customers."

"Sounds good."

The old woman, Amane, waived the entry fee for me, and I headed straight for the display room in the basement. Mei had already come down. She was standing next to the black coffin that sat in the back of the room, lined up next to the doll inside that looked exactly like her.

Her outfit was spartan: skinny jeans and a plain T-shirt. But her shirt was an ashen color, as if it had been coordinated with the dress on the doll inside the coffin…

“Heya,” I said with a wave. I walked up to her and asked a question. It had been nagging at me for a long time, but I still hadn’t worked out the answer. The words came out inadvertently.

“Hey, about that doll—” I pointed at the doll in the coffin. “It was modeled on you, right? The first time I saw you down here, you told me something…That it was only half of you? But what does that mean?”

“Maybe not even half.”

That was Mei’s response. Right—she’d said something similar that other time, too.

But she’s only half of what I am. Maybe not even that.

“She’s—”

Mei’s eyes slipped over to the coffin.

“This girl is the child my mother bore thirteen years ago.”

“Kirika? So then she’s your little sister?”

But didn’t Mei say she didn’t have any sisters?

“This is the child that woman bore thirteen years ago, who died before she was ever born. Before Kirika even had a name picked out for her.”

“Wh—”

Do you…have an older sister, or a younger sister maybe?

But when I’d asked her that before, Mei had shaken her head in silence. Why was that? If I were to ask her that now, I imagined I

would get an answer like, *Because your question was in the present tense.*

"It's true that she used me as a model, but Kirika made the doll with her thoughts on her own child. The child she was unable to bring into the world. That's why I'm only half of it. Maybe even less."

I'm one of her dolls, see.

Which reminded me of the way that Mei had described her relationship with Kirika. It was…

I'm alive, but I'm not the real thing.

Feeling incredibly confused somehow, I couldn't figure out anything to say in response. Moving calmly away from the coffin, Mei asked, "Anyway, what's going on?"

She changed the subject smoothly.

"You called me up out of nowhere. Was there some kind of crisis?"

"Were you surprised?"

"A little."

"Actually, I met up with Teshigawara and Mochizuki a little while ago. They asked me to come out to this café Mochizuki's sister runs."

"Oh, yeah?"

"And then…Well, I thought I should talk to you."

Teshigawara's smarmy grin floated through my mind, seeming to say *You're bringing Mei after all, eh?* Inwardly, I glowered at him… while I told Mei the "new information" I'd learned at the "Inoya" café.

Once I'd run through it all, there was a brief silence before Mei spoke.

"Where's he going to look for it?"

"The old school building," I answered. "The classroom in Building Zero, the one they used to use for third-year Class 3. You said that's where they get the old desk for the one who's 'not there,' right?"

"Yeah. The rules say you're not allowed to go up to the second floor of that building, you know."

"Well, it's summer break…We said we'd pick a time when there probably wouldn't be anyone around and then try to sneak up there. Though who knows what we'll find—maybe nothing. But we have to try."

"Hm-m-m."

Mei sighed and brushed back a lock of hair.

"You're not going to tell Mr. Chibiki? I bet you he'd help if you did…"

"Yeah, I thought we ought to tell him, too. But Teshigawara…I don't even know. He's in this weird adventure mode now. He was saying we should do this on our own and I don't think anything's going to change his mind."

“Oh” was all the response Mei gave before falling silent. *No way she’s not interested*... I thought, and then asked, “So then, did you want to come?”

“To search the old school building?”

A faint smile came over Mei’s lips. “I’ll leave the search to you boys. You can’t have too many people involved in something like that anyway.”

“You’re not interested? Don’t you wonder what’s hidden in that classroom?”

Mei replied, “Yeah, I do,” without any posturing. “So if you find something, let me know.”

“Well, sure…”

“Anyway, I have to leave for a little while, starting tomorrow.”

“Leave?”

“My father’s back.” Mei’s face darkened a shade. “He wants to go to our vacation house with my mother. I’m really not thrilled about it, but this happens every time, so I can’t exactly say no.”

“You have a vacation house? Where?”

“By the beach. It takes about three hours to get there by car.”

“Outside Yomiyama?”

“Well, yeah. There’s no beach in Yomiyama, is there?”

“So you’re making a break for it?”

At that, Mei shook her head firmly.

“I’m coming back in a week.”

“So then…”

“I haven’t told anyone in my family about the ‘disasters.’ And I intend to go on the camping trip after I get back.”

“…Oh.”

After that, I talked for a time about all the stuff I’d been doing. Mei was basically silent, her right eye occasionally crinkling in a cool smile as she listened to me talk.

“You got *that* convinced that you might be ‘the casualty’ all over again?”

That was the first thing Mei asked me after everything I’d said.

“How seriously did you question it?”

“…Pretty seriously. Once you start thinking about it, you just spiral out.”

“You work through all your misgivings?”

“Enough, yeah.”

Seeing my ambiguous nod, Mei turned languidly around. Then she disappeared beyond the black coffin without another word.

What’s she doing? I thought, hurrying after her. Was she going upstairs in the elevator that was back there?

As I started around the coffin, I let out an involuntary cry. “Oh!” I hadn’t noticed it this whole time, but something was different from

before.

Before, a deep burgundy curtain had hung directly behind the coffin, but now the coffin was placed much farther out. And in the space created between the coffin and the curtain—

A second coffin had been placed.

The same size, the same shape…Only the color wasn't black: this coffin had been painted red. It had been set back-to-back with the black coffin in front of it.

I heard Mei's voice say, "She's working on a new doll up in her workshop. I guess she's planning to put it inside this one." Her voice seemed to have come from "inside this one," as she'd put it.

There was still a little space left between the red coffin and the curtain, rustling in the flow of the air-conditioning. I slowly moved forward. Twisting my upper body to push aside the curtain with my right shoulder, I peeked inside the red coffin.

Mei was inside it.

Mimicking the doll in the black coffin. It was much too small for her, but her knees were bent slightly and her shoulders hunched a little.

"…You're not 'the casualty.'"

Her face was only centimeters from my face as I peered into the coffin. She'd taken the eye patch from her left eye, though I don't know when she'd done it. The "doll's eye" resting in the socket was fixed on me, blue and empty.

“Relax.”

Her voice was a whisper, and yet somehow forceful. Seeming somehow unlike her own.

“It’s not you, Sakakibara.”

“Y-you…uh…”

She was too close. I scrambled backward, off balance, trying to put some distance between us. My back ran up against something hard right away: the steel door of the elevator hidden behind the curtain.

“What about your mom’s photo?” Mei asked, still resting inside the coffin. “That group photo from after the graduation? You said it might be at your grandparents’ house. So did you find it?”

“No, not yet…”

I’d asked my grandmother and she was in the process of looking for it.

“When you find it, would you let me see it?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“In that case—”

Finally Mei came out of the coffin and moved into the center of the room. Yet again, all I could do was chase unsteadily after her.

“Here.”

Mei turned around and held something out to me. It was—

“If anything happens, call this number.”

It was the size of a business card, with the contact information for the gallery printed on it. The number she referred to was written on the back in pencil.

"This is"—I accepted the card, then looked at the numbers written on the back—"a phone number? For a cell phone?"

"That's right."

"Your cell phone?"

"Yup."

"You have one? I thought you said they're awful machines?"

"They *are* awful." Mei's right eyebrow bunched in consternation. "It feels gross being connected by radio waves twenty-four hours a day. Really, I wish I didn't have it."

I looked hard at her face.

Mei repeated, "I wish I didn't have it, but…," then continued in a depressed tone. "She makes me use it."

"You mean…Kirika?"

"Apparently she goes crazy worrying sometimes…So she's the only person I ever talk to on it. I've never once used it except with her."

"Huh."

The whole thing felt surreal as I looked down once again at the cell phone number written on the card. Mei put her eye patch back on to hide her "doll's eye," sighing softly.

“If you find out anything with your search or that photo, let me know. Direct, at that number.”

6

Before I started elementary school, back when I can only barely remember, I saw a video called *Dracula*. It was one of the most famous movies by a British company called Hammer Film Productions, filmed way, way before I was even born. It was the first time I remember watching a horror movie. After that, I constantly watched—or, should I say, was forced to watch—videos of the Dracula series my father had collected because he adored it so much.

Despite my age, I had some deep-seated questions back then, when I was little.

Why does the sun set as soon as the main character visits Castle Dracula?

Dracula is a scary monster, but he has so many weaknesses. Chief among them, weakness to the light of the sun. In the middle of the day, he wouldn’t be any problem at all. So then if the main character is going to fight Dracula, why does he head out for the castle when he’ll only get there right before the sun goes down?

I understand it perfectly now. The answer is “in order to advance the plot,” obviously. But still.

It sounds strange, but when Teshigawara, Mochizuki, and I hammered out our plan to sneak up to the second floor of Building

Zero, that was the very first thing I thought of.

Purposely waiting until nighttime to go was crazy. We weren't heading out to fight vampires or anything, but even so, we had to avoid the sun going down while we were up there at all costs. I guess it was kind of a personal obsession.

In contrast, Teshigawara wasn't convinced about going in the middle of the day. And sneaking in early in the morning "doesn't sound right, either," he had declared.

It wasn't purely a question of what we liked better, though. We had to choose the right time of day for three third-year boys to be wandering around the school grounds during summer break, or else we'd probably stand out in a bad way. That was a concern, too. And so—

After compromising between all of our different schedules and opinions and whatever else, we decided we would go at three o'clock in the afternoon on July 30. Sunset was going to be before seven o'clock, so it probably wouldn't get dark outside while we were searching the room.

In the end, we never consulted with Mr. Chibiki about our plan. And of course I didn't tell my grandmother or Reiko about it, either. Maybe Teshigawara's influence had gotten me caught up in the idea of "a secret adventure over summer break."

On the day of action, we gathered at the art club room on the western end of the first floor of Building Zero. Mochizuki had opened the room up for us ahead of time, since he was in the club.

We didn't want to stand out, so all three of us wore our uniforms. We had decided that if we happened to run into a teacher who said something to us, we would get out of it by saying the art club was having a meeting.

Then, after three o'clock…

The three of us headed up to the second floor of Building Zero, according to plan.

A rope hung across the entrances to the stairwells on the east and west ends of the building. A piece of cardboard hung from the center of the rope, with three words written starkly across it: "Do Not Enter."

We checked to make sure there was no sign of anyone nearby, and then slipped under the rope one by one. Then we stealthily ascended the normally untraveled stairs.

"Does this old building not have any of the 'Seven Mysteries of North Yomi'?" I asked Teshigawara partway up the stairs, half jokingly. "Like maybe the number of stairs changes sometimes? This place is just screaming for something like that, don't you think?"

"I dunno," Teshigawara answered harshly. "I couldn't really care less about the 'Seven Mysteries.'"

"Well, excuse me! When you and Kazami were giving me the tour of the school, you sure seemed into it."

"That was, I mean…Look, that was because I had no idea how to tell you about the special situation of third-year Class 3. I was trying my best."

“Huh. So then you really don’t believe in that stuff?”

“In ghosts or curses, you mean?”

“Right. That stuff.”

“To be honest, I don’t think that stuff can possibly exist. Except for this one thing with third-year Class 3.”

“So what about the predictions of Nostradamus? Didn’t you say you thought they were going to come true?”

“How are they gonna do that?”

“Man.”

“If I really thought that stuff was going to come true, I wouldn’t be getting myself all worked up over this right now.”

“Good point.”

“The best-known of the ‘Seven Mysteries’ in Building Zero”—just then, Mochizuki cut in—“has to do with a secret in the secondary library.”

“The secondary library? Is something in there?”

“There’s a story that says you can sometimes hear a person moaning quietly in there. Did you ever hear it, Sakakibara?”

“Never.”

“The rumors say there’s a sealed underground room beneath the library. There’s supposed to be a bunch of old papers hidden down there with secrets about the school and the town that absolutely cannot go public. And in order to guard the documents, an old

librarian was supposedly sealed up inside the room a long time ago…"

"So that guy's still alive underground and people can hear him? Or does the voice belong to the old guy's ghost?" Teshigawara asked, and then snickered. "**Not terrible** for a ghost story, but… come on. Compared to the 'disasters' that are actually happening to our class? Stories like that just sound cute."

"…That's true."

We stepped out into the hallway on the second floor.

Light from outside shone through the bank of windows on the north side of the hall, making it much brighter than I had expected. But the fact that this place had been off-limits and unused for years and years was obvious from the grime and damage we could see here and there. The dust that had collected on the floor worked with a peculiar stagnant odor to fill the place with an overwhelming feeling of abandonment.

The room that had once been used as the classroom for third-year Class 3…

It was the third room from the western end.

This was information Teshigawara had verified with Kazami. He said Kazami, who was also serving as a tactical officer, had taken on the role of going to the old classroom with Akazawa and some others at the start of May to get the desk and chair for the one who's "not there."

The door to the room wasn't locked and, at last, fearfully, the

three of us stepped into the classroom.

Inside the room, it was dimmer than out in the hallway.

A dirty beige curtain pulled across the southern windows was the reason for that. It had been more than ten years since this room had been used. So then why had they left these curtains here, just as they had been for ages? I guess it didn't really matter.

A circuit must have been tripped, because even when we tried flipping the switch, the lights didn't come on. If we opened the curtain, the room would probably get pretty bright, but we were reluctant to do that in case someone saw and took it as inspiration for a new "mystery" to add to the seven.

And so…

Keeping the curtain closed and the room dim, the three of us began our search.

Each of us had brought a small flashlight with us, anticipating a situation like this. I'd brought work gloves, too. We were kicking up horrible amounts of dust, so Mochizuki put a handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

The first thing we did was split up to search the thirty-odd desks and chairs one by one. As I searched, I couldn't stop all kinds of terrible images from running through my mind.

Twenty-six years ago in this classroom, none of the students had acknowledged the death of Misaki Yomiyama, "the one who had died," and over the course of an entire year they had treated him as if he were "one who still lived." And because of that…

This inexplicable "phenomenon" had begun, triggered by their actions. How many people had been dragged to their deaths because of it over the last twenty-five years? Third-year Class 3 had been in this room until fourteen years ago. So how many people had died right here?

There could very well have been people who lost their lives in this room, just like Mr. Kubodera had.

Someone could have fallen out of the windows to their death.

Or someone could have had some kind of attack in the middle of class that killed them.

As these solitary thoughts continued, I was seized by the sensation that, right this second, I too was being lured ever closer to death. *Cut it out.*

"Cut it out. Just drop it," I whispered aloud to myself, frantic. I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. I breathed in some dust and started coughing, but that actually helped me to shake the thoughts.

What you need to focus on right now is the search…Come on.

On the assumption that a graduate from 1983 named Katsumi Matsunaga had once hidden something away in this room…

So where was it, then?

I searched the desks and chairs thoroughly and then came to the realization, *Probably not someplace like this.* That would be way too easy to find to say it was "hidden."

So then it had to be somewhere else…

He would have hidden "it" in a place it wouldn't be found so easily, and yet somewhere that a person would eventually discover it.

I was pretty sure it wouldn't be somewhere that a person would never find, no matter how hard they looked. Otherwise it didn't mesh with his desire to "tell someone about it."

So it probably wasn't somewhere we'd have to pry up the floorboards or knock out the walls or ceiling. Which meant…

I took a look around the room. *Maybe there?* A row of student lockers built into the back of the room struck me immediately.

They were lockers, but not the kind with a door that shuts and locks. They were like wooden shelves, with openings about forty or fifty centimeters square, arranged in a grid.

Abandoning my search of the desks and chairs, I stood in front of the lockers. Teshigawara and Mochizuki soon came to stand beside me, apparently guessing what I was thinking.

"You think it's in here?" Mochizuki asked.

"Dunno," I said, cocking my head to one side. "Let's just go through all of them to be sure. There might be some dead space in the back."

"True. Well…"

But in the end, our labor was in vain. We searched inside every single locker, but we couldn't find a single thing that **seemed like what we were looking for**.

“Where else could something be hidden?”

I took a look around the dimly lit classroom. And finally I spotted **something**.

A closet in the corner of the room for the cleaning supplies.

Like the lockers, it was an old wooden fixture about two meters high. What was inside? Maybe somewhere people wouldn’t normally look in…

I hurried over to it and pulled open the long, narrow door with the black steel handle. There were a couple of brooms, a dustpan, a bucket, and a mop. Old, utterly unremarkable supplies standing as they had been left long ago.

I felt no hesitation. I pushed the brooms and mop aside and squeezed myself inside the cramped box. Then I shone my flashlight overhead.

As soon as I saw **it**, the words tumbled out: “…Is that it?”

“What is it, Sakaki? Did you find something?” Teshigawara asked, running over.

“There’s—”

I reached my hand out for it, standing on tiptoe.

It was on the top panel of the cleaning supply closet I had squeezed into. Something was taped up there with black packing tape.

“There’s something up there. I can’t tell what.”

Several layers of diligently applied tape held it in place. Holding my flashlight in my mouth, I freed up both of my hands to try and yank **whatever it was** off the top panel.

Finally—

After a long effort, I pulled **it** off and went back outside. It hadn't been that much of a physical effort, and yet I was out of breath and my face was slick with sweat.

"What is that?"

"It was taped to the ceiling in there. I don't think anyone would notice this hidden up there unless they got inside like I just did."

"Probably not."

"I wonder what it is."

The **thing** I'd pulled off the top panel was itself wrapped up in several layers of packing tape. This tape wasn't black, though. It was brown cloth tape.

How big was the **thing** inside it? It was probably smaller than a paperback, once you got all the tape off.

We moved over to a nearby desk and set the **thing** down on top of it. The first problem was going to be getting off those layers of tape.

"Hey, hold on a second," Teshigawara said. "There's something written on the tape."

"What?"

Restraining my eagerness, I picked my flashlight back up and

shone it on the **thing**. I had to look really hard, but…There it was.

There were letters written on the surface of the brown tape in red marker. The writing hadn't come off when I'd pulled off the tape holding the **thing** up in the closet—I guess because that side had been facing the ceiling.

To the students who
come after us
who may be afflicted
by disasters that defy
explanation…

That's what we could make out. The penmanship was sloppy, almost a scrawl.

"Bingo." Teshigawara snapped his fingers. "You know that guy Matsunaga wrote this."

We decided to set to work right then and there. Getting the packing tape that was wrapped around the **thing** off cleanly was a real pain. After several minutes of plain old effort, we finally revealed it for what it was—

An audiocassette tape. A totally nondescript TDK brand sixty-minute tape, at the start of the reel.

7

Taking the cassette tape we'd discovered with us, we fled the

restricted entry zone and returned to the art club room. It was after five o'clock in the afternoon when we got there. I was struck by how much time had passed; it was later than I'd thought.

"You guys got a tape player?" Teshigawara asked Mochizuki.

"Not in here, no," Mochizuki replied, which caused Teshigawara to dig his fingers into his dusty brown hair.

"We've got to listen to this thing, at least. But seriously, a cassette tape?"

"They didn't have mini discs fifteen years ago."

"Well, sure, but…Hm-m-m. I don't think I've got anything that can play cassettes at my house."

"I do," Mochizuki said. "What about you, Sakakibara?"

"No idea…"

The only audio device that belonged to me was a portable mini disc player that I'd brought with me from Tokyo, and it only had playback capability. I'd never seen my grandparents listen to music on anything other than the TV. I wouldn't be surprised if Reiko had a cassette player in her office, but…

"Mochizuki's house it is," Teshigawara declared.

"Okay." Mochizuki nodded, then immediately changed the motion. "Wait, no…Look at this."

Gently lifting the tape in both hands, he showed it to us.

"Look there. It's hard to tell, but see? The tape inside is broken."

“Man…”

“You’re right.”

“It probably got stuck to the packing tape and snapped when we were pulling it off.”

“Urgh.”

“So now what?”

“It won’t play like that.”

“Are you serious?”

“Why didn’t the guy put it in a case before he hid it? Blows my mind.”

Teshigawara’s face pulled into a fierce scowl, and he dug his fingers into his hair yet again. The buzzing of cicadas on the trees in the courtyard right outside the window had filled the background this whole time, but it seemed almost menacingly loud now.

“What should we do?”

Teshigawara hurled the question out restlessly, but Mochizuki’s reply was distracted.

“I think we can listen to it if we fix the tape.”

“Huh? You can do that?”

“It shouldn’t be that hard if I try.”

“Oh. Great, so the tape is in your hands now, I guess.”

“Is that okay with you?” I asked, wanting to give Mochizuki a

chance to refuse.

He nodded solemnly. “I’ll give it a try anyway. It might take me a little while, though.”

And so we left the art club room and the three of us passed through the school gates together.

Evening was approaching quickly and the western sky had begun to take on a crimson hue. It was incredibly vivid and more beautiful than it seemed possible for anything in this world to be. As I looked at it, I grew a little somber and my eyes almost started to tear up. During last year’s summer break, I never would have thought that a year later I’d be embroiled in an “adventure” like this.

Then, interrupting my thoughts…

When we reached the bus stop, all of a sudden we heard a shrill, distant sound. The sirens of an ambulance and police cars wailing over one another.

“Must have been an accident.”

“…I guess, yeah.”

“We’d better be careful, too.”

“Definitely.”

That was all we said to each other.

I learned the news before lunch the next day, on the 31st.

About the death of Atsushi Ogura (age nineteen, unemployed).

They said that after graduating from a local high school, he had forgone regular employment and had instead spent every day locked away in his house. I suppose it wouldn't be wrong to call him a shut-in, one of the young people who'd become controversial of late.

July 30 at 5:26 P.M.

At that moment, a large construction vehicle that had finished up work nearby had lost control and plowed into Atsushi Ogura's house. The building had collapsed, dragging down the room on the second floor where Atsushi had retreated. His room faced the road, so it suffered an almost direct hit from the vehicle. Atsushi had suffered serious wounds over his entire body, worst of all being a fractured skull. Before dawn on the 31st, he drew his last breath at the hospital they'd brought him to.

The problem was his name, "Ogura."

There was a girl by that name in third-year Class 3 at Yomiyama North Middle. In fact, Atsushi Ogura, who had met such an unfortunate death in this accident, was her older brother by blood. The third "death of July," after Mr. Kubodera and his mother.

Interlude IV

Um, my name…My name is Katsumi Matsunaga.

I'm in the third-year Class 3 for 1983 at Yomiyama North Middle. And I plan to graduate next March.

I'm recording this tape on the night of August 20. It's after eleven o'clock. There's maybe ten days left until summer break is over. I'm alone in my room, talking to the tape recorder.

Once I finish recording, I'm planning to hide this tape somewhere in the classroom.

Someday…I don't know how long it'll take, but if someone finds this tape someday and listens to it, then…I wonder what the chances are that *you, listening to this tape right now*—maybe there's more than one of you—what are the chances that you're students of a future third-year Class 3, following in my footsteps? And what are the chances that the same things that I…that we've experienced this year are happening to you, and you're afraid of the senseless disasters befalling your class?

…It doesn't matter.

It doesn't do me any good to think about how likely that stuff is right now. It really doesn't.

Um…Right, **broadly speaking, there are two explanations for why I decided to create this tape**.

The first is to…**"confess a crime" I've committed, I guess…**That sounds right. That's what this is.

I want to tell someone about what I've done. I want someone to hear my story, and so I've…Yeah. That's what this is. No matter how much I talk to the people around me right now, they won't understand. They won't talk to me about it. Everybody's already completely forgotten about it. That's the situation I'm in now, so I…I have to at least…

The other reason is **to warn *you*, my future underclassmen… or actually, to give you some advice**. This…

…This is a major issue.

In the end, it's up to you whether or not you believe what I'm about to tell you…But I hope you'll believe me. Because I'm not going to lie about anything on this tape.

The "extra person" who infiltrates third-year Class 3 and the "disasters" that happen because of them…Some people call it a "curse" and some people say it's something different, but it doesn't matter who's right. **The issue is, how do we put an end to the *situation*?**

What I mean is…

It's…

No…Maybe I have to tell the story in order after all. Yeah. I'll do that.

…

…

…We went on a camping trip.

A class camping trip for third-year Class 3, for two nights and three days, starting on August 8. At a lodge called the "Sakitani Memorial Hall" that the school owns at the foot of the mountain Yomiyama.

Maybe you're wondering why we decided to do that. Our head teacher, Mr. Koga, suggested it. He said we should go on a camping trip and visit the shrine.

Yomiyama has been called "Mount Yomi" for ages, and there's that ancient shrine on the side of the mountain. He said that if everyone went to Yomiyama Shrine, it would break the "curse" for sure…Essentially, we were going to pray for the gods to save us.

From what I heard, Mr. Koga had thought long and hard about the problem and had consulted with a medium about it. And some people said this was the advice he got. But I don't know how it actually happened.

In any case, I went on the trip.

Twenty students participated, including me. None of us really completely believed it would do anything, but on the second day of the trip—August 9…That's the day when the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki so many years ago, huh? I guess that doesn't really have anything to do with my story, though…So on the second day of the trip, the teacher dragged us up the mountain to visit the shrine.

The shrine was unbelievably run-down.

Even though it's got the same name as this town, it looked like it wasn't really being maintained. Kind of like it had been forsaken by

the rest of the world.

So while we were visiting the shrine, we all helped to clean the place up. Right then we were all, I dunno—we became convinced that doing that really might break the curse. Mr. Koga was so confident, he even told us, “Everything is going to be all right now.” But then…

…**It didn’t work.**

The curse wasn’t so wimpy that a simple thing like that would break it.

We left the shrine and we were on our way back. It happened that fast. The weather had been clear all morning, but all of a sudden ominous clouds appeared and it started raining out of nowhere. It was a really bad thunderstorm. Mr. Koga and all the students were in this huge panic and hurried down the path, like they were trying to get away, but I guess that was a bad idea. No, at this point I can say it was obviously a pointless thing to do. Totally pointless.

A boy named Hamaguchi was the first to go down.

He got struck by lightning. He was an idiot. He was so overprepared, he’d brought an umbrella. And then he went and opened it up. Even though we were on a mountain path and thunder was rumbling all around us…

…It was a direct hit.

I was walking ahead of him, so I didn’t see it, but the sound of it was monstrous. I’d never heard lightning strike so close before.

I think…Hamaguchi must have died instantly. He was burned to a

crisp and tendrils of smoke were coming off of his body. At that point, it was full-on panic.

Mr. Koga tried to calm everyone down, but the situation was completely out of control. We ditched Hamaguchi, and most of the students started running, trying to save themselves…That kind of influenced me, too, and I just thought, *I have to get off this mountain*, so I started running blindly. And in the midst of it all… the second sacrifice was taken.

It was a girl named Hoshikawa.

She wasn't struck by lightning. She was running around in a panic and left the path and went flying over a cliff…

The ledge was sheer and high. A rescue attempt wouldn't have been beyond us, but we were in no condition to try, so in the end we left her behind…I guess the only thing we could do anymore was get down the mountain and call for help.

It turned out that Hamaguchi and Hoshikawa were never saved. The two of them became "deaths of August." And our visit to the shrine had no effect at all…

…

…

…

…And then.

The most important part happened after that.

Right after we all got down the mountain at last, *it* happened.

It being that…that I…

Chapter 14

August I

1

"Let's take a picture," Yuya Mochizuki suggested a little awkwardly. He took a compact camera out of a side pocket of his day pack and pointed it at us. "A photo to remember this by. It's our last summer of middle school, so…How about it?"

"Why don't I take the picture?" Ms. Mikami replied, turning toward Mochizuki.

"Uh, no. You should be in the picture."

Mochizuki shook his head, looking a little flustered.

"Everybody line up over there. Good. Okay, Ms. Mikami, please get into the shot, too."

We all lined up in front of the gate to the lodge as he directed. We stood centered around a bronze plaque on a blackened stone gatepost that read "Sakitani Memorial Hall."

"Okay, I'm taking the picture!" Mochizuki said, readying the camera. "Maybe we should put the bags off to the side. Sakakibara and Misaki, could you move in a little closer? You too, Ms. Mikami…Okay, good. Ready?"

We heard the shutter click.

The "everybody" in the picture consisted of five people in total. Me and Mei, Ms. Mikami, and the mismatched duo of Kazami and Teshigawara.

All of us students were dressed in our summer uniforms—white short-sleeved open-collar shirts for the boys and a white short-sleeved blouse for the girls. Since we weren't at school, no one was wearing their name tag. Like her students, Ms. Mikami wore a white blouse with a light brown jacket over it.

The buzzing of cicadas cascaded down from the forest that surrounded the clearing the building was in. Even so, the strident calls of the brown cicada and the bear cicada were absent. The soothing voice of the evening cicada was there, a sound so rare to hear inside a city. Growing up in Tokyo as I had, the first time I'd heard the call so long ago, I'd thought it was a bird singing.

"Okay, Mochizuki, now you get in," Teshigawara said. "I'll take the picture."

"Oh, but…"

"Don't be shy. Go and stand next to Ms. Mikami."

"Um, okay…"

Mochizuki handed the camera to Teshigawara, then scurried over to us and took his place. Teshigawara wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm, then raised the camera and said, "Here goes!"

He raised one hand up high. The sound of the shutter followed immediately after.

"Hm-m-m. Let's do one more. Hey, Mochizuki! You're too far away from Ms. Mikami! Snuggle right up there. Sakaki, you and Misaki too! You stay where you are, Kazami…Okay, now that looks

nice."

What exactly was he trying to imply?…Not that I really cared.

"Here we go! Chee-e-ese!"

"Cheese"—people have been using that word to get people to smile for a picture forever…Not that I really cared about that, either. But right now that lack of interest felt strangely pleasant.

The evening of Saturday, August 8, was a slice in time when I managed to give myself over to that lack of interest ever so slightly, so I felt a certain degree of peace…

Together, we had taken the public bus to reach this spot at the foot of Yomiyama Mountain on the northern fringe of the city. We'd gotten off at the end of the line; then climbing the hillside on foot had taken another twenty minutes. During this progress, more than half of the students who'd come along had acted more or less like that…

With a veneer of peace.

I knew everyone else was aware of it, too.

In reality, I knew that every last one of us felt fierce anxiety and fear deep in our hearts. We all understood each other's feelings, but it was an unspoken understanding that we didn't show outwardly.

Don't speak of it frivolously. If you say it out loud, the object of your anxiety and fear will turn into an immediate reality. We had all fallen into that sort of mind-set…*Probably pretty common in a situation like this*, I thought. Plus…

Given that, everyone was probably completely aware that this "veneer of peace" wouldn't last all that long. There was no way it could.

2

The Sakitani Memorial Hall stood in a forest at the foot of the mountain. It was a Western-style building that had a slightly classical air, contrary to the vague expectations I'd formed before arriving.

Mr. Whoever-he-was Sakitani was an alum of North Yomi and also a local celebrity. He'd originally built this place as a facility for his company and had donated it to the school a few decades ago. They'd named the place after him, so now it was called the Sakitani Memorial Hall.

"To be honest, the school has no idea what to do with it."

I'd heard that from Mr. Chibiki, as part of a combo offer with some other basic information.

"The money and resources it takes to repair and maintain the building are outrageous, and yet the place has been used less and less in recent years. Still, they can hardly sell the place off."

At the beginning, only a handful of students agreed to go on the camping trip. Makes sense, I guess.

Sure, Ms. Mikami had told them it was "an important ritual," but without having a more concrete goal laid out for them, it was pretty

natural that they'd be reluctant to go. Even if fleeing town was out of reach, shutting yourself up at home and staying put was obviously much safer than going on some camping trip. There were plenty of people who held that opinion.

But then the shut-in Atsushi Ogura went and died the way he had at the end of the previous month.

Even if you shut yourself up at home and didn't set foot outside, you were never totally safe. When they realized that, some students said, "Well, in that case…" and had a change of heart. Apparently a rumor made its way around promising that if we went on this camping trip, everyone would be saved. And so, after the permission deadline had passed, a string of people popped up, saying, "I've decided to participate after all…"

With the number spiking at the last minute, we wound up with fourteen people on the trip. Nine boys and five girls. That was a participation rate of fifty percent. Including our chaperone, Ms. Mikami, fifteen of us would be spending two nights and three days at the Sakitani Memorial Hall, starting today.

We had gathered at the front gate of the school. There, Ms. Mikami had informed us, "We'll be climbing Yomiyama tomorrow. We'll visit the shrine on the mountain and pray for the class's safety."

The students' reactions were mixed, but I hadn't detected any real conviction in her voice when she made the announcement in the first place. And it wasn't just me. I think Teshigawara and Mochizuki, at least, had the same thought. Maybe Mei did, too.

A class camping trip had followed the same schedule over summer break fifteen years ago. On August 9, everyone had gone up the mountain to pay their respects at the shrine…But I was very familiar with the outcome of that day. And I knew Ms. Mikami herself was fully aware of it, too—how two students had died in freak accidents on the walk back from the shrine.

So I'm sure she couldn't help feeling reluctant herself. Even so, literally at the end of her rope, she had made her decision: if there was even the slightest chance…Yeah. That's probably what had happened.

There was a couple living at the Sakitani Memorial Hall who kept the place up. The two looked to be around sixty years old. Their name was Numata.

Mr. Numata was a skinny man with a small frame. Deep wrinkles crisscrossed his dark, balding forehead and he had sunken, upturned eyes that looked totally cantankerous. He was just as tight-lipped and gruff as he looked. Mrs. Numata had a contrastingly beefy and generous build. She bustled around regardless and spoke cheerfully. As the line of us came toward her, her welcome was almost disturbingly grandiose.

I wondered if the two of them had been here during the camping trip fifteen years ago.

The thought struck me out of nowhere, but this didn't seem like a good time to suddenly hit them with a question like that.

The two-story building was constructed in a Western style, with mortar painted over a wood frame. To give a very rough sketch, the

structure had a “U” shape with its back to the mountain in the north and the frame opening toward the south.

It had originally been a recreation facility for a company, and had continued to be used in that vein ever since. In addition to the spacious hall and dining room, the building included a fair number of bedrooms, as well. They were basically two-person rooms, and although the place was visibly becoming more decrepit, the interior decorations and fixtures were a little bit like a hotel. The bathrooms and showers were communal, but every room was air-conditioned.

There were enough rooms for each person to have his or her own, but following Ms. Mikami’s instructions, we were split up two to a room. This was probably done out of a concern for safety.

And so.

I wound up sharing a room with Yuya Mochizuki.

3

“Did you bring the tape?” I asked Mochizuki once we’d put our bags in our room and relaxed a little. His expression went instantly hard, and he nodded solemnly.

“Yeah. I brought a small tape player, too. All we had at my house was a tape deck, but Tomoka lent me this one.”

“Did you tell her what it’s for?”

“I didn’t really explain what’s on the tape. She asked me about it,

but I didn't feel like I could talk about it."

"Oh."

I lay down on a bed, then crossed my arms and put them behind my head. I thought back to four days ago when, on the afternoon of August 4, Teshigawara and I had gone over to Mochizuki's house.

Mochizuki had called the night before to say, "I fixed the tape." And so the next day, we'd quickly gotten together to listen to it.

Remembering my promise to Mei, I tried calling the cell phone number she'd given me, but no matter how many times I tried the number, she never picked up. She told me later that she'd still been at the vacation house by the beach that day, which was outside the service area, and reception was pretty bad there.

And so the three of us had listened to the tape on a stereo with a tape player that Mochizuki had in his room.

There was a ton of background noise, and the recording quality was not what I would call great. We were reluctant to turn the volume up very high, too, so we put our ears right up next to the speakers and focused all our attention on the voice coming out of them…

"Um, my name…My name is Katsumi Matsunaga."

The voice on the tape began with an introduction, then told the story of going up Yomiyama on the camping trip fifteen years ago and how there had been two accidents on the trip back down the mountain. After that, there was a long pause before he continued.

"…And then. The most important part happened after that.

"Right after we all got down the mountain at last, it *happened.*

"It *being that…that I…"*

What he—Katsumi Matsunaga from fifteen years ago—told us next was most definitely the "confession of a crime" he'd committed, as well as a "warning" and "advice" for us, who were following in his footsteps fifteen years later.

"We came down the mountain and went back to the lodge to call for help…And in the middle of all that confusion—I'll be honest—there was a little flare-up."

Matsunaga's story continued thus:

"Honestly, I don't remember what set it off. I was pretty badly shaken up, like all the rest of them…So I don't remember the details of what might have caused ***something like that*** *to happen.*

"But anyway.

"We were outside the lodge, out in the woods. ***One of the other boys*** *and I were yelling at each other, and it escalated until we were wrestling.*

"Thinking back on it now, I never could stand ***that guy****. I don't know what it was. I guess he was just so blasé about stuff, no matter what happened. I guess it just kept wearing down my nerves until finally I got angry at him…I mean, that's the kind of guy he was.*

"After both of those accidents and the terrible things that had happened to those two people that day, there he was, as laid-back as ever, like it didn't matter to him at all, and I think that just

enraged me…I think I was probably the one who grabbed him first, and then we got into a fight out there.

"He was…"

And then Matsunaga said the name of the "other boy" / "that guy." I think. But just at that part, the noise on the tape got a lot worse and I couldn't make out anything he said. It was the same for the rest of the recording, too: Whenever he said "that guy's" name, it would get covered up by really bad static. We never managed to find out his name.

So now that I'm writing down what Matsunaga said on the tape, I guess all I can do is put "——" for the boy's name.

"Anyway, we sort of had a fight out there…And when I came back to my senses, he wasn't moving."

His voice at this part was lower than before. It sounded as if it was shaking, though maybe I was just imagining that.

"We started wrestling, and I think maybe I shoved him as hard as I could, but…I just can't remember the details.

"He stopped moving.

"He'd fallen down next to a huge tree in the middle of the woods. I shouted at him, but he didn't answer. When I went over to him, I found a branch rammed deep into the back of his head, and blood was gushing everywhere.

"When I shoved him and he fell back against the tree, a branch must have been sticking out right in that spot and stabbed him in the head…That's what I figured. It's the only thing I could imagine,

given the situation.

"——…died.

"I tried taking his pulse. I even put my head on his chest to check for a heartbeat…But he was definitely dead. I…I'd killed him.

"That was when I got really scared and I ran back to my room in the lodge.

"I'd killed ——…and I couldn't tell anyone. I'm going to be honest and admit that I was thinking that if someone found him, it might get brushed aside as an accident.

"The rain kept pounding the whole rest of that day, and we wound up staying there one more night. Although some people's parents came and took them home. The police came, too, and asked us all sorts of questions…But even then, I didn't say anything about what happened to ——. I couldn't.

"I barely slept at all that night. I was so nervous that someone might find ——'s body, and any minute the whole place would blow up…

"And yet…

"When morning came, apparently no one had yet.

"Even though someone should have realized that there was one less student…that someone was missing. And yet the teacher was oblivious, and so were the students. It was like they hadn't noticed…like they didn't care…

"And so I fought back my horror and snuck out to check on him.

Out to the woods where ——'s body should have been. And when I did…"

Here again, the voice on the tape paused for a long while. We could make out a low sigh mingling with the noise in the background.

*"When I did…**he wasn't there**. His body wasn't there. He'd disappeared, and there wasn't a trace of him left. There weren't even any signs of blood. Maybe the rain had washed it away.*

"I was so shocked, and totally confused. I couldn't stop myself from going around asking people about him. I would say stuff like, I wonder what happened to ——; I wonder where he is; Do you think he went home already?

"When I said those things, every single person made a weird face at me. The teacher, the students—everybody. '——? Who's that?' they said. 'I never heard of him.'

*"It seemed impossible, so I checked, and they told me that there had only been nineteen students on the trip. Not twenty. So basically, they were saying that as far as they knew, **no one named —— had ever existed in the first place**.*

"Seriously, I thought I was going to go crazy. But then finally I realized. What I mean is…

"The guy I killed…—— must have been the 'extra person' hiding in our class this year."

The recording on the A side of the tape cut off abruptly.

All three of us gasped, unable to say a word. Mochizuki fast-forwarded through the rest of the tape, then started playing the B side.

"...This is the confession of my crime."

From fifteen years ago, Katsumi Matsunaga delivered the same message over again.

*"And also advice for **you**, my future underclassmen."*

The three of us kept our attention focused on the sound of the recording coming from the speaker, beset constantly by interference.

"I know I caused ——'s death that day...I killed him. That fact hasn't changed. That's why I decided to make this 'confession.' I thought it might soothe my conscience a little...

"But ironically, what I did was also 'salvation' in a way. Salvation...Do you understand what I mean by that? It was 'salvation' for everyone in our class.

"It happened purely by chance, but the fact that I killed ——... The result was that it saved everybody. ***When the 'extra person' in our class died, the 'disasters' for this year ended.*** *It's only been ten days since it happened, but I'm pretty sure it's for real. The proof is...*

"The fact that no one remembers who —— is anymore.

"It started the very next day after I killed him. Not the teachers, not the students, not his parents...None of the people connected to third-year Class 3 that I know, at least, remember the fact that there

was a boy named —— who was part of our class since April of this year. They've forgotten him. Or I guess you could say their memories have been repaired.

"By returning 'the casualty' who should never have existed in the first place to Death, the numbers match up…And order is restored to the world. All kinds of modifications have been corrected, starting with the memories of the people involved. I guess that's how I need to think about it.

"I was so profoundly involved in ——'s death, I'm the only one who still remembers him. But I think that's just a matter of time.

"For the record, the guy named —— was actually the little brother of someone named ——, who was in third-year Class 3 two years ago—in 1981. And this guy's little brother —— died as part of the 'disasters' for that year. And everyone except me has had their memories totally reconfigured to ***the truth of that*** *already.*

"I think I'm probably going to start forgetting about ——, too.

"Even if I keep my memories about the basic facts that some unidentified 'extra person' came into our class in April and every month someone related to the class died…I'm pretty sure that all the rest of it, like the fact that —— was the 'extra person,' or that I was the one who killed him, or that the 'disasters' for this year stopped because of what I did, will eventually vanish from my memory.

"…That's why.

"That's why I got the idea to leave behind this tape. I thought of

hiding it somewhere in the classroom because sooner or later even I might forget what this tape means…

"…That's why.

"I'm recording my experience while my memory is still clear… To try and pass on these facts to you future underclassmen, who might be suffering the same things we did. And the advice for how you can stop the 'disasters'…

"Okay? You understand, right? You know why I did it, right?"

And then, at the very end, Matsunaga's voice took on extra emphasis.

*"**Return 'the casualty' to Death.** Then the order for the year will be restored.*

"Got it?

"Return 'the casualty' to Death. You have to kill the 'extra person,' like I did. That's the only way to stop the 'disasters' once they've begun."

4

"You told Misaki about the tape, right?"

This time, the question came from Mochizuki.

"Most of it, yeah," I replied, still lying on the bed. "I saw her the day before yesterday and we talked about it. She said she wanted to hear it for herself. That's why I asked you to bring the tape and a

tape player today."

"…You did say that."

Mochizuki sat down on the edge of the other bed and propped both hands under his cheeks. The room's air conditioner wasn't on, but the window was wide open. That was because the outside air flowing into the room had a coolness to it that was unlike that in the town. It was even less like the air in Tokyo during the summer.

"Anyone else?" Mochizuki asked next.

"What?"

"Did you tell anyone else about the tape?"

"Oh…yeah. I mentioned a little bit about it to Reiko," I replied without even thinking.

"Reiko?…Oh." Mochizuki pulled one hand away from his cheek and nodded. "Did you tell her everything?"

"I just checked the facts with her." Slowly lifting my upper body, I continued, "Since she was on that camping trip fifteen years ago, too. I wanted to verify the part about going to the shrine on the second day and two students dying in accidents on the way back."

"…And?"

"It seemed like the details were blurry, but she said the part about the two students on the way back down the mountain sounded about right, once I mentioned it to her. Thinking back to it seemed to really bring back the shock she felt at the time, too…"

What am I supposed to do? she'd murmured painfully at the time.

What can I possibly do about it?

Faced with that reaction, I…

"You didn't talk about anything else?"

"I checked whether or not she'd had a classmate named Matsunaga. She said, 'I think I did.' But when I asked if there was a student who disappeared, besides the two who'd died, she said 'I don't know.'"

"Just like the tape said."

"…Yeah."

"That's all she said?"

"Yeah."

I just hadn't been able to summon the willpower to tell her the full story: that the way to stop the "disasters" once they had started was to find the "extra person" / "casualty" and return them to Death —to kill them.

"And you didn't tell anyone else?"

"No, I didn't."

"Me neither. I don't think Teshigawara did, either."

"There wasn't any point telling anyone. It would just cause a panic."

"True."

Looking at it calmly, I believed the thing we really needed to fear was mounting, overactive paranoia.

If the “extra person” / “casualty” gets killed, then the “disasters” will stop.

If everyone else in the class found out about that, what would happen?

The answer, I knew, was that everyone would start scrambling to out the “extra person.” Despite the fact that there’s no way to figure it out. And if they were to just decide that someone was the “extra person” without any concrete evidence…

Just imagining it made me my skin crawl.

A terrifying premonition had the same effect.

That was why, at least for the moment, we thought it was best to keep this information locked away in our hearts. I had told them, though, that I might tell Mei as an exception.

“Hey, Sakakibara,” Mochizuki said, his eyes roving around the room. “Do you think they’re here on this camping trip? The ‘extra person,’ I mean.”

“…I dunno.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it. When I think about how the ‘extra person’ might be here with us, I…”

“Everyone feels that way,” I answered, then took a deep breath. “It’s no good telling yourself not to think about it. Even Teshigawara’s doing it. I noticed him sneaking glances at everyone today. He was probably wondering if he could tell who the ‘extra person’ was…”

“Is there really no way to figure it out?”

“It sounds like it was pure chance for that guy Matsunaga fifteen years ago.”

“…But really, there’s no way?”

“That’s what I heard.”

I moved to the edge of the bed to face Mochizuki. The cherubic young man with the love of Munch and older women slumped his shoulders and dropped his roving eyes to the floor.

“But suppose there was a way…and that you found out who the ‘extra person’ was. What would you do then?”

“You mean…”

“Would you kill **that person**?” I asked, half intending the question for myself. “Could you do that?”

Mochizuki didn’t answer, and though he’d lifted his eyes at my question, he dropped them once again. He gave a deep, drawn-out sigh that sounded thoroughly discouraged. I followed with a sigh of my own and lay back down on the bed.

*Would you kill **that person**?*

Could you do that?

I repeated the question for myself, not speaking it aloud.

*Who would kill **that person**?*

How could they do it?

“You think we’re actually going to go up the mountain tomorrow?” Mochizuki asked, looking toward the window.

“I don’t think the plan’s changed,” I replied.

“But we know there’s no point in visiting the shrine…”

“True enough.”

“If the weather’s bad, it’ll get canceled, right? I hope it does. If it starts raining like it did fifteen years ago, I don’t even…”

“Definitely…You want to hang a charm in the window to make it rain?”

Just then my cell phone started to ring. I knew it was mine from the tune it played.

I jumped up from the bed and rummaged through my bag for my phone, then checked the LCD screen.

“It’s Misaki,” I told Mochizuki before answering the phone. I guess the signal was pretty weak, because through some pretty unpleasant static, *Kkssshkkshh, vvvmmvvmm—*

“Sakakibara?”

Finally I picked out Mei’s voice.

“Where are you?”

“With Mochizuki, in our room.”

“Where’s your room?”

“On the second floor, toward the end. Left from the front door. The number is, uh…”

“Two-oh-two,” Mochizuki informed me in a whisper.

“Room two-oh-two.”

“Can I come over?” Mei asked. “There’s still a little time before dinner and all.”

5

Before Mei got there, Mochizuki said, “I’m going to take a look around,” then went out on his own. Maybe he was trying to be considerate.

When Mei finally reached the room, she told me why she’d come the moment she opened the door: “I wanted to hear that tape.” I quickly complied. The tape and the tape player were on a small table next to the window. Mochizuki had taken them out of his bag for us.

As I put the tape in the machine and pushed the play button…

I replayed in my mind the conversation Mei and I had had when we’d met two days ago.

That morning, first thing, my grandmother had made an announcement. “I found the photo of Ritsuko.”

I’d asked my grandmother to look for the photo after my phone conversation with my father. That’s what she’d found.

“Where was it?” I’d asked, and she’d replied, “In a closet in the side house.”

The side house was the place Reiko was using as an office/bedroom. Why were things in there that had belonged to my mother fifteen years ago?

"Ritsuko used to use the side house, a long time ago," my grandmother explained. "When she married Yosuke and went off to Tokyo, we moved most of the things she'd left behind to the main house here, but…When I went in and looked around, I found this box all the way at the back on the top shelf in a closet. Here you are."

She held out a small box that was flat and old. I could make out a name written in black ink on a corner of the dusky pink lid: "Ritsuko," written in cursive English letters.

"There are a lot of photos in there. I'm sure one of them will be of her third-year class."

Just as I'd promised, I called Mei on her cell phone. She was back from her vacation home at the beach that day and my call went through without any trouble.

"Can I come over?"

Right. Mei had said the same thing then. She'd come to Koike after noon.

That was the first time I'd ever had her over to my house. When I introduced her, my grandmother looked pretty surprised at first, but then she switched into full-throttle welcoming mode and offered Mei juice and cookies and ice cream and on and on…*Thank you, Grandma.*

In the small box my mother had left behind, there were four photos in all. Just as my grandmother had suggested, one of them was the class photo we were looking for…

March 16, 1973
All my friends in third-year Class 3

That was the note penciled on the back.

March 16. I guess that was the day of the graduation ceremony.

It was a faded five-by-seven color photo. If everyone in the class was in the photo, that meant they'd used a timer to take the picture.

All the students were gathered in the classroom in front of the blackboard. The people in the first row had their hands on their knees and were hunched forward slightly; those in the second row were standing up straight; and in the third row, they stood on the teacher's platform. That was the overall arrangement. In the center of the second row was the head teacher. It was Mr. Chibiki, in his younger days. His arms were folded over his chest and his lips were pressed together tightly, the smile coming only from his eyes and cheeks.

I recognized my mother, Ritsuko, age fifteen, standing diagonally behind him. She was dressed in the same uniform as she had been in the yearbook photo I'd seen in the secondary library. She was smiling, but there was an almost imperceptible tension in her face.

"It's…," Mei whispered, her eyes on the photo she'd taken from

my hands. “Can you tell, Sakakibara? Do you see which one is Misaki Yomiyama?”

“Yeah…about that.”

I peered down at the photo from one side.

“It’s got to be that guy, on the right side.”

There was a boy standing apart from everyone, on the very edge of the teacher’s platform. He was smiling like everyone else, but there was something sad about it. His shoulders were slumped and his hands hung limply at his sides. He didn’t look like he was “standing” there so much as—and maybe I was imagining this—“floating” there or “hovering”…

“…I mean, just looking at him, he seems kind of off, right?”

“You think?” Mei’s voice trembled and cracked. “He looks strange to you?”

“…Yeah.”

“How so?”

“I can’t really…”

Confused, I explained it exactly the way I’d felt it.

“How should I put it? Compared to the other parts of the picture, right there it’s like…I don’t know…like it’s out of focus or the air around him is warping slightly or something. That’s how.”

“Oh. What about the color?”

“What color?”

“You don’t see a weird color?”

“No, not really…”

The photo creeped me out more and more the longer I looked at it. If I explained what was happening to my dad, and then showed him this photo and told him, “This is a genuine paranormal photo,” I wonder how he’d take it. Most likely, he’d laugh it off and tell me, “Don’t be ridiculous.”…But still.

Ridiculous and unscientific as it may be, this was the real thing. That’s why we were both so…

“Thanks,” Mei said, handing the photo back to me. I didn’t see when she’d done it, but the eye patch was gone from her left eye.

I could see the “blue eye, empty to all” that belonged to a doll. With a soft sigh, it was covered back up.

“Are these other photos of your mom, too?”

“Yeah.”

I looked through the other three photos in the box in order, holding them in front of me. This time, Mei was the one to look down at them from one side.

One photo was of my mother with my grandparents. It looked as if they were standing outside the front door of the house. This one was probably from her middle school days, too.

The next one was of my mother all by herself. She was in a nearby playground, flashing a peace sign on the jungle gym. This one was obviously of her when she was still a child in elementary school.

The last showed the duo of the sisters, taken somewhere in the house. On the back I found a note that said "Ritsuko, 20. With Reiko." There was eleven years' difference between the two of them, so Reiko would have been about nine in this picture.

"…Huh," Mei murmured softly. "Figures."

"What figures?"

"That they'd look alike."

"Huh?"

"Your mom and…uh, your aunt."

"Oh…you think so?"

"It doesn't really show in the picture of the two of them, but if you compare their faces when they were kids like in the second and third ones, they're almost identical."

Mei was right. It was the same thing I'd felt when I'd first seen my mother's yearbook picture. That, adjusting for age, the two girls really did look a lot alike.

I mean, they were full-blooded sisters, after all, so it wasn't such a shocking idea. That's what I told myself so very casually in my own mind, but to Mei I said, "Maybe, yeah," and tilted my head from side to side. I think she might have given me kind of a peeved look.

"Is your Aunt Reiko not here today?" Mei asked in a formal tone, her right eye narrowing smoothly.

"I think she went out somewhere," I replied.

“You said she uses the side house as an office?”

“She says it’s her studio. I’ve never been inside, though.”

“So she works on art at home, huh?”

“Yeah. She studied oil painting in art school, and I heard she’s won prizes at contests and stuff since then…According to her, that’s her real job.”

“Huh. Interesting.”

When Mei had finished listening to the “confession” of Katsumi Matsunaga, she let out a sigh even longer and deeper than Mochizuki’s had been. Tugged back from my reflections, I stopped the tape player.

“Return ‘the casualty’ to Death…,” Mei murmured in a hushed tone. It was almost as if she were intoning some kind of ghastly spell. Her expression looked incredibly tense, and her face incredibly pale.

“All the parts where he says the name of the ‘extra person’ were totally fuzzed out, right?” I asked just to make sure, and Mei nodded silently. “Does that mean the corruption of the records goes as far as this?”

“…Probably.”

“If those kinds of changes could happen to this tape, then…”

At that point, I gave voice to a faint doubt that had been nagging at me.

“How come the name of the ‘extra person’ for each year doesn’t

disappear from that binder Mr. Chibiki writes it down in? Or how come it doesn't get smudged or something?"

"I dunno." Mei cocked her head to one side, but finally she said, "It could be that Mr. Chibiki's notes **have been overlooked** purely by accident."

"Overlooked?"

"Or maybe they're exempt."

"By some kind of accident?"

"I don't really get it, but maybe it's the stance Mr. Chibiki takes as an 'observer,' or maybe it's the time he writes down his notes, or it could be the location in the secondary library itself…All kinds of factors could be combining to produce **that sort of anomaly**. Or it could be that this tape is the abnormality."

"How so?"

"Look, it's a record from the only year ever when things stopped partway through the year. Maybe when 'the casualty' is returned to Death, **even something like this** gets affected, which is exceptional."

"Hm-m-m."

"Either way, since the thing we're facing is **this 'supernatural natural phenomenon,'** all we can do is accept it **for what it is**…"

An unsettled silence dragged out for a few beats after that.

Staring at the silent tape player, Mei said nothing. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but in the end she said nothing.

I wonder what's wrong. She's not usually like this…

"Could I ask you something?"

Finally, I was the one who spoke.

"It's not about this tape, but it's been on my mind since way back."

"…What?"

"About your **cousin**, Misaki Fujioka."

I'd meant to switch subjects pretty much impulsively. But Mei reacted with a "Yeah?" and an abstracted look on her face. I followed up, undaunted, "I forget when, but you know that picture you drew in your sketchbook? You know, the girl you said you were going to give wings to last of all…"

Mei didn't answer.

"You also said it was half your imagination, half modeled on someone, so…Was the model Misaki?"

After the slightest of pauses, Mei replied quietly, "I guess."

"Were you guys close?"

"…I guess."

"Why was she…"

I was about to load on another question when Mei interrupted, shaking her head slowly. "Later. I'll—" She pressed her palm hard against the eye patch over her left eye. "I'll tell you about it later. Let me think a little longer. Please…"

Just at that moment, Mochizuki returned. As soon as he opened the door and saw us, he gave a deliberate cough, then told us, “I think dinner’s going to be soon. They want us all to come to the dining hall.

“Also, that librarian, Mr. Chibiki, came. He said he’s here to support Ms. Mikami.”

6

It wasn’t yet seven o’clock at night…

Apparently in answer to Mochizuki’s wish, rain had started to fall. It was only at the level of a drizzle, but since the wind had picked up, we constantly heard the sound of the rain beating against the windows.

The dining hall was on the first floor, off in the right-hand corner from the front door—northeast, if you prefer cardinal directions—a spacious room taking up one entire corner of the building. Enough for ten rectangular tables covered in white tablecloths. Each was accompanied by four chairs. Some food had already been laid out.

“First of all, everyone—” Ms. Mikami began, looking around at the fourteen students gathered there. “Mr. Chibiki has come today to lend us a hand. As you know, he’s the librarian in the secondary library. Let’s have a quick introduction. Mr. Chibiki?”

Mr. Chibiki stood up. Even though it was the middle of summer, he was dressed in his usual all-black and his hair was as shaggy as

ever.

“Hello, my name is Chibiki.”

He looked at each of our faces in turn, running a fingertip along the black frame of his glasses.

“I suspected Ms. Mikami might encounter quite a few difficulties undertaking this trip alone, and so I decided I would come along. Forgive the intrusion.”

Compared to how he treated Mei and me in the library, his speech was obviously strained and smacked of being on his **best behavior**. I suppose it was because it had been such a long time since he’d quit teaching social studies and had last spoken formally to a large group of students like this. In any case, just then—

“I’m also well aware of the peculiar circumstances into which this year’s third-year Class 3 has been placed.”

All of a sudden, Mr. Chibiki touched on the issue at the center of it all. His voice was more detached and harsh than strictly necessary, perhaps due to his efforts not to expose his own tension or anxiety.

The atmosphere in the room froze over instantly.

“The plan is for everyone to ascend Yomiyama tomorrow, and naturally I will accompany you. I intend to help however I can to ensure everything goes well. Let’s all be careful of accidents on our return. Still…” Mr. Chibiki glanced at the window, and then shifted his gaze to Ms. Mikami, who was at his table. “The weather has deteriorated somewhat.

“If there’s rain tomorrow, the outing will be canceled, correct,

Ms. Mikami?”

“Oh. Yes.” Ms. Mikami shifted her head uneasily. “We’ll see how things are tomorrow…”

“Very good.” Mr. Chibiki turned back to us and continued. “I was hoping we’d be able to have a barbecue outside in the true spirit of a summer camping trip, but…”

His tone was much more casual than it had been. And his voice much gentler.

“Considering the circumstances, I suppose that’s not possible. Tonight, at least, it’s best to keep as low a profile as practicable. Let’s take the rain as a sign that heaven is supporting that decision.

“In any event, I’m glad to be here. If you feel ill or have anything on your mind, please feel free to come see me.”

For a while after that, the time passed with the atmosphere feeling intensely uncomfortable, even suffocating.

The intermittent sound of rain hitting the windows. Voices wafting sporadically from each table, too low to make out. The sounds came together to form a low, unsettling murmur.

When the caretaker Mrs. Numata began busily bringing out the food, the atmosphere in the room started to relax at last.

“Maybe we should tell Mr. Chibiki about the tape,” I whispered to Mei.

“I think we should, anyway,” she replied, shooting a look at Mochizuki and Teshigawara, who shared our table. Mochizuki

inclined his head to one side without answering, but Teshigawara pursed his lips and shook his head.

"What, are you opposed?" I asked.

"I'm not saying I'm a hundred percent against it, but…" Teshigawara pursed his lips again, a glum look on his face. "I guess we can't keep the secret to ourselves forever. And I dunno, maybe talking to that guy and seeing what he has to say is one option. But…"

"Don't you want to hear what he thinks about it? No matter how you slice it, Mr. Chibiki has spent a long time observing this 'phenomenon.'"

"I guess that's true…"

"Then let's tell him."

"…Okay."

"Misaki and I will wait for a good opportunity and talk to him after dinner."

"…Yeah, okay."

Teshigawara's face was still glum, but he nodded reluctantly.

"All right, everybody, eat up now!" Mrs. Numata's cheerful voice urged us, and we began to eat. I didn't get the impression that anyone worked there except this husband and wife, so I guess Mr. Numata was the cook.

"Mr. Chibiki brought us very high-quality meat, you know. After he went to all that trouble, we decided to try cooking it in barbecue-

style skewers. Go on, eat as much as you like. Don't be shy asking for more rice, either. You're all still growing."

Even with the encouragement, though…

Neither the circumstances nor the atmosphere did much to encourage anyone's appetite. It did nothing for me, either. I knew I was hungry, and the food all looked delicious, but I couldn't work up any gusto for eating.

I wondered just how much the Numatas knew about the background and purpose of this trip. Then add in the question of whether they were here for that trip fifteen years ago, and my mind started working all over again…

As my eyes lazily followed Mrs. Numata's fluttering return to the kitchen, I noticed Mr. Numata standing in the shadow of the door, peeking into the dining hall. I watched the two exchange words as Mrs. Numata passed by him, but his face was gruffness personified, as always. And in that moment, the light in his sunken, beady eyes struck me as deeply unnerving.

"That old guy is so fishy," Teshigawara stopped to comment to me, the skewered meat halfway to his mouth. "Ever since we got here, he's had this scary look in his eye when he's looking at us, y'know?"

"Yeah…I guess."

"Maybe he's got some huge grudge against teenage boys. And maybe that lady's so friendly to cover for her husband's personality."

“Why would he have a grudge?”

“You think I know?” Teshigawara answered sharply. “People are always talking about how bad juvenile delinquency is getting, but there’s plenty of old dudes who are dangerous, too. I bet you there are tons of old men who just lose it one day and kill their own grandkids or whatever.”

“Uh…Maybe, yeah.”

“Better not take your eyes off that guy.”

Teshigawara spit the words out in a whisper, who knows how seriously, then put the skewer back on his plate.

“They could have served us rotten food. Or maybe he mixed in some sleeping pills and once we’re all asleep, he’s going to go around and cut us up one by one.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I was about to tell him he watched too many B horror flicks, but…I caught myself with an *Urk*. That’s because I heard a critical inner voice say, *You’re talking about yourself there, pal.*

“By the way, Sakaki.”

After a few moments, Teshigawara started up again.

“This whole time, I’ve been thinking, what if the ‘extra person’ came with us today? And if they did, then who is it?”

“I could tell it’s been bothering you.” I sat up a little straighter and replied, “So? Any guesses?”

“Well…” Teshigawara trailed off. It wasn’t by much, but his expression became even more glum than before. “Supposedly there’s no way to tell who the ‘extra person’ is by looking at them…But maybe there’s still a way. Some little sign of it or something. What do you think?”

“I couldn’t say,” I replied honestly. “They say ‘there’s no way,’ but maybe that just means ‘we haven’t found one yet.’”

“Right?”

“But still.”

I fixed my eyes on Teshigawara’s profile. His brows were tightly knit.

“What if you did find one?” I asked. Again, I was partly posing the question to myself. “What would you do then?”

Teshigawara’s brows scrunched together even more forbiddingly, and he muttered, “Yeah, I dunno.” But he just pursed his lips again, not expanding any further.

7

Most of the students were wrapping up their meals.

“Ms. Mikami, may I please say something?”

With those words, one of them stood up. It was the second class representative for the girls, Izumi Akazawa.

“There’s something I want to make clear, since we’re all here.”

As soon as I heard that, I got a terrible feeling.

There were three other girls at her table. In other words, all the girls who'd come on this trip other than Mei were sitting together… Which, by itself, was a worrying thing.

No question, the class had considered Mei Misaki a strange person from the beginning. From May until the beginning of June, in the name of the "strategy" to prevent the "disasters," she had been forced to take on the role of the one who's "not there" and had been totally alone. In a certain sense, I suspected, doing that had preserved the **positive balance** of the relationships in the class.

That period from the start of June up to July, when I had been added to the list of those "not there" as a new "strategy," had been the same. They may have been caught up in a visceral sense of danger, but because they had excised Mei and me—the **foreign elements**—from the equation, the balance within the group of third-year class 3 had been kept stable. However…

The moment that Mr. Kubodera's death had forced them to realize that the "strategy" of increasing the number of people "not there" had been useless, everything had changed.

Mei Misaki, no longer "not there." Mei, the strange girl whose existence could no longer be ignored. How did Akazawa and her friends feel about her? What would they inevitably feel?

I don't know if I should say luckily, but that was when summer break had started, so the breakdown in balance didn't come to a head in the classroom. You could say that the girls' emotions had been put on hiatus, too.

But today, when the camping trip was beginning…

Mei Misaki was supposed to be isolated, but now she was talking completely at her ease with me—no big deal—as well as with guys like Mochizuki and Teshigawara, too. And then she sat at our table for dinner. As if she were ignoring the other girls, and most of all Akazawa, when it was supposed to be the other way around.

How could they not be disoriented by a situation like that? How could they not be disturbed by it? Frankly, it couldn't have been fun.

During dinner, I had noticed occasional looks they had thrown **in our direction** from their table. At the same time, in a corner of my mind I'd pictured the conversation they were having: probably **about us** and probably not very nice.

In that moment when her permission was sought, Ms. Mikami's reaction was sluggish enough to make me worry whether she was feeling all right. After several beats, she replied, "Oh…sure. Okay. Go ahead, Akazawa."

Akazawa nodded mutely. Then, just as I'd expected, her eyes narrowed into a glare and turned on our table. Her voice came at us sharply. "Misaki! There's something I want you to hear tonight."

I watched Mei's face in profile. She looked…calm.

"You, Misaki…And you, too, Sakakibara."

Akazawa's words came smoothly and her diction was perfect. She was like a spirited prosecutor standing in a courtroom.

"Several unfortunate things have happened since May, and that

terrible thing that happened to Mr. Kubodera last month…I don't have a clue if going on this trip will get things back under control, but at least for all those 'disasters' that have struck up until now…I think you bear some of the responsibility for them, Misaki."

Mei, responsible for…?

Before I could challenge her to explain why, she said, "I think you have the same responsibility, Sakakibara."

Throwing a glance at Ms. Mikami, Akazawa added harshly, "If Misaki had carried out her role as the one who's 'not there' like we all agreed at the start, then no one would have died. The reason she couldn't do that was because Sakakibara talked to her. That's why we—"

"Hold it."

The one who cut her off was Teshigawara.

"Don't you think that was, I dunno, kind of inevitable? Something no one could help happening?"

"Who knows." Akazawa put one hand on her hip before continuing in a totally dismissive tone. "Maybe we screwed up by not telling Sakakibara what was going on ahead of time. When I think about how I was out sick the first day he came to school, it's gut-wrenching…But even so, if Misaki had stuck to her act and completely refused to deal with him, if she had just ignored him, the 'strategy' should have worked. Tell me I'm wrong."

"I don't…"

"Even if I acknowledge that we failed when the 'strategy' of

having two people ‘not there’ didn’t work…Still, the original blame for the failure lies with Misaki, in my opinion. Am I wrong?”

For a moment, Teshigawara looked cowed, but then he came right back at her. “And? So what? What are you saying we should do about it now?”

At that, Akazawa gave a conspiratorial look to the girls at her table, then ran her gaze over the boys at the other tables.

“An apology,” she proclaimed. “We still haven’t heard a word of apology from Misaki. And yet, Misaki, the *second* you stopped being ‘not there,’ you were acting like nothing had ever happened, as if…”

Her ferocious gaze pounced on us. I felt rage and hatred and resentment in it, but more than that, I detected a fierce irritation… However.

How irrational can you get...I couldn’t hold back irritation of my own. *Mei’s gotta be*...I looked over at her again. But she was as calm as before—no, she looked icy.

“For Sakuragi dying.”

It wasn’t Akazawa who spoke those words out of nowhere. It was Sugiura, the girl sitting next to her. She had a “loyalty first” look to her, and was constantly glued to Akazawa’s side.

“My seat was by the hall window, so I saw what happened that day. How she…”

…Ah.

I couldn't help remembering it myself. That day, the last day of midterm exams, when Mei and I, and Yukari Sakuragi…

"When she found out about her mom's accident, Sakuragi ran out of the classroom in a huge hurry. At first, she started going toward the East Stair like usual, but then you and Sakakibara were standing in front of the staircase. So Sakuragi panicked and changed direction, and she headed for the West Stair…"

…Yes. Sugiura was right about that.

"When she saw Misaki and Sakakibara together even though Misaki was supposed to be 'not there,' she must have gotten scared. That because they were together, the **talisman** hadn't worked and that's why her mom was in that accident…So in order to avoid you two, she ran the opposite direction down the hall."

"If you two hadn't been there right then—"

Akazawa picked up Sugiura's argument.

"If Sakuragi had gone down the East Stair like usual, that accident might never have happened. That's what I'm talking about."

"You can't be…"

The words came out of my mouth unconsciously.

"The same kind of thing happened to Mizuno's older sister, too." Akazawa pressed on. "After it happened, Mizuno told me that his sister was friends with you, Sakakibara. And that you'd been spilling all kinds of details to her about this problem in third-year Class 3."

“Uh, that’s…”

“Maybe **because you talked to her about that stuff, she wound up** as one of the ‘deaths of June.’ You could interpret it that way, right?”

“Uh…”

…My fault.

It was my fault that Ms. Mizuno had died in that accident.

Having someone point it out officially made the sadness, regret, and self-reproach—though faded—rear their heads as fresh as ever. Yeah. Maybe Akazawa was right. I hadn’t understood anything about what was happening then, but still, blazing in and getting Ms. Mizuno involved was absolutely my fault…

“This is irrelevant.”

Just then, Mei spoke. In the cold, detached voice she always used, that I knew so well.

“However much you want to talk about these things, it’s not going to solve anything.”

“‘Solutions’ aren’t what we’re looking for right now.”

Akazawa’s words were pretty harsh.

“What we’re trying to tell you, Misaki, is that you need to recognize your own responsibility and apologize to everyone.”

“And if I do, it’s going to mean something?”

Mei quietly rose from her seat and returned her accuser’s gaze

straight on.

"If so, I'll do it."

"Misaki—" I tried to stop her. "No…You can't apologize for this kind of—"

If anyone needed to apologize, it was me. If I had never transferred to North Yomi this spring, then none of this…

Mei ignored me, though. Without waiting for Akazawa's response to her question…

"I'm sorry."

She said it matter-of-factly, then slowly dipped her head.

"I'm sorry. This is my fault…"

"No!"

I shouted the word without thinking.

At almost the same moment, a loud voice cried out, "Stop it!" It was Mochizuki.

"This is stupid."

That from Teshigawara. He banged both hands down on the table angrily.

"It doesn't mean anything having her do that. The only thing that matters is finding out who the 'extra person' is!"

Hold on.

No, Teshigawara—wait. I know how you feel, but if you tell them

about it at a time like this…

…Just then.

A fresh commotion started, clearing the foul air of the place.

8

"Hey, Wakui—are you okay? What's—"

Someone cried out suddenly, drawing our attention.

It was the table next to us. Tomohiko Kazami was one of the four sitting there. The voice belonged to the kendo club member Maejima, who was sitting across from Kazami. Wakui, the person he was talking to, was sitting to his left, and something was visibly wrong with him. His chair was pushed back and he was doubled over, facedown, pressing his forehead against the edge of the table. His shoulders were heaving in obvious pain.

"Hey—Wakui!"

As he called Wakui's name, Maejima chafed the boy's back.

"You okay? Can you breathe? Come on."

A second later, Mr. Chibiki had run over to them. As soon as he'd gotten a look at Wakui, he murmured, "Asthma?" then turned back toward Ms. Mikami, who'd run up behind him. "Does this student have asthma?"

But all Ms. Mikami did was dither; she couldn't answer right away.

"Yes," Kazami answered for her. "Wakui's got asthma. His medicine is always…"

Kazami pointed at Wakui's right hand, which was thrown across the table. He was clinging to a portable inhaler.

"Your medicine…Can you take it?" Mr. Chibiki asked Wakui, but his shoulders were heaving more and more painfully. He was in no condition to answer the question. *Heeee, heeee*...The bizarre sound of his breathing was audible. He was wheezing—no, this was closer to whistling.

Wakui sat in the seat in front of me in class, but this was the first time I'd seen him have an attack like this. Since I'd suffered a collapsed lung twice this year, his difficulty breathing wasn't hard for me to sympathize with. Pneumothorax and asthma were different, but seeing him, I felt my own breathing start to get more strained…

Mr. Chibiki picked up the inhaler and operated it to pump out the medicine. It made a soft *hssh* noise.

"Ah…It's empty." He brought his face close to Wakui's ear and asked, "Did you bring any spare medicine with you?"

Through his labored gasping, Wakui barely shifted his head from left to right in response. It conveyed his meaning: *No.*

"Call an ambulance!" Mr. Chibiki ordered in a loud voice, straightening from his crouch. I had a flicker of memory of the time he'd come running into the classroom immediately after Mr. Kubodera's suicide. "Ms. Mikami, can you please go and call an ambulance right away?"

9

It was several seconds later that we learned the phone installed in the building was unusable. Mrs. Numata ran in from the kitchen when she heard the alarm to tell us that. She said the circuit had been malfunctioning since the night before and had stopped working entirely that afternoon.

"We can't place any calls, so we haven't been able to arrange to have it fixed yet. But now, of all times…"

Before she had finished, Mr. Chibiki rummaged in a pocket of his coat and pulled out a cell phone.

"It's no good."

His voice was a dispirited—a deadened—mutter.

"The signal…"

"You can't get through?" I asked, taking a step toward him.

"We're out of range."

"My cell phone worked before."

"Then we'll use that. Hurry," Mr. Chibiki ordered. "Every company is different."

"It's in my room."

"Go and get it, quickly!"

Then—

“I’ve got a phone.”

“Me, too.”

Two people offered theirs. They were Teshigawara and Mochizuki. Mei was silent. I guess she’d left hers in her room, like me.

“I see. Then please,” Mr. Chibiki said to them. “Try calling one-one-nine for an ambulance. It’s an emergency.”

But in the end—

“That’s weird. I’ve got one bar, but it’s not getting through.”

“Me, too…They’re not working, sir.”

Teshigawara’s cell phone and Mochizuki’s PHS had been rendered useless in this place.

In fact, when Mei had called me earlier, there had been so much noise that it was hard to make out her voice. I guess the signal was just fundamentally bad in the mountains. So then…

There was one other cell phone and a PHS among the other students. But they weren’t able to get through, either.

Wakui’s asthma attack continued the whole time. He wasn’t able to sit in the chair any longer and finally sank to his knees on the floor. Maejima was frantically rubbing Wakui’s back, which was heaving with the boy’s respiratory distress.

“This is bad. I don’t see any cyanosis developing, but we can’t just stand around.”

Mr. Chibiki pulled his lips into a stern line.

"I'll take him to the hospital in my car."

He looked over at Ms. Mikami, who stood unmoving and pale.

"All right, Ms. Mikami?"

"Er…Yes. I'll go with you."

"You can't do that. You stay here, with the other students."

"Oh…Yes. You're right."

"I'll contact his parents from the hospital. I'll come back once his condition has stabilized. Oh, Mrs. Numata? Could you please bring a few blankets? We have to make sure he doesn't get cold."

"Right away."

Mrs. Numata pattered off down the hall.

The students who had gathered around the table and the students who were watching from a distance…All wore expressions betraying the anxiety and fear that gripped them. One of the girls was even sniffling quietly.

"It's fine," Mr. Chibiki addressed everyone. "There's no need to worry. If we go to the hospital now, he'll be fine and nothing serious will come of this. I promise you, everything is fine, so try not to upset yourselves. All right? This is an attack he's used to suffering with his condition, not some extraordinary event. Nor is it a freak accident. So there's no need to let your anxiety and fear take control. Calm down, and do what Ms. Mikami tells you. I'd like you all to go to bed early tonight. Understood?"

There was no change in the firmness of his expression, but his tone was impossibly calm. More than half the students nodded obediently, myself among them, but…

He's lying.

The words whispered through my heart.

Obviously what Mr. Chibiki had just said was a lie. And if the word "lie" is too harsh, well—it was a desperate maneuver to assuage everyone's distress ever so slightly.

None of the "disasters" befalling the class were simply "freak accidents." Hadn't Ikuo Takabayashi, one of the "deaths of June," always had a weak heart? And yet he had lost his life to an attack involving his heart.

It wasn't out of the question that Wakui would just happen to forget to check the amount of medicine he had left right when he was going on this trip, even though he used it every day for his asthma, but it was hard to see the situation as normal. In addition to the tension and anxiety we'd all felt, his stress just happened to be heightened by the eruption of that shouting match…And the result had been an attack. When we'd tried to call an ambulance, the phones at the lodge just happened to have been out of service all day. And then on top of everything, the signal strength made it hard for mobile phones to get through.

The fact that so many coincidences and instances of bad luck had collided was, in fact, an example of the **risk bias** peculiar to third-year Class 3 in an "on year." How could we not think so? To use Mei's words, this class was "close to 'death'"…

Finally, Mrs. Numata brought blankets and bundled Wakui up in them, then Teshigawara and I helped take him to the building's entrance. The car Mr. Chibiki had come in was parked in the driveway, close to the front door. It was a mud-spattered silver sedan. I couldn't tell what model it was, but I was pretty sure it was something pretty old.

It was almost nine o'clock at night.

The rain was still falling in a drizzle, but the wind gusting through the night was getting stronger and stronger. I even convinced myself that I could hear, now and again, the high-pitched scream of some creature or other rising up from the woods around us on the wind that stirred through the branches…

When Wakui was settled in the backseat of the car, I ran over to Mr. Chibiki, who was getting into the driver's seat, and called out to him. "Um, Mr. Chibiki, there's actually something I…"

The cassette tape Katsumi Matsunaga had made: I wanted to tell him about it, even if only to give him the barest description, but there was simply no time for that anymore.

"It's all right. I promise you, I'll help Wakui," Mr. Chibiki said, almost as if to convince himself.

"Um…Be careful."

"I will. But you look after yourself, too. You have a time bomb in your lungs."

"…I will."

"All right, we're off. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Mr. Chibiki raised a hand in a casual wave, then closed the door.

I realized Ms. Mikami was standing alongside me, though I hadn't noticed her approach, so I decided to ask, "Are you all right?"

She turned her ashen face to look at me, and nodded. "Yeah. No need to worry about me…Okay?"

Running a hand down her rain-slicked hair, she put on a smile whose frailty was unmistakable.

"Um…Maybe we really should cancel going up the mountain tomorrow."

In a hoarse voice, she replied, "Maybe." And then even the smile she'd worn a moment earlier vanished from her face.

10

We watched Mr. Chibiki's car drive off and were just retreating back inside when—

"Sakakibara—hold on."

Mei stopped me.

"Thank you for what you did."

"Wha—?" The question slipped out of me.

"When they were saying all that stuff about me in the dining hall."

"Oh, you don't need to…"

We were standing on the porch outside the front door. A little rain was blowing in. The only illumination was a dim porch light. It backlit Mei perfectly, so I couldn't really tell what expression she wore as she looked at me.

"It wasn't just me. Mochizuki and Teshigawara were…"

"Thanks," she repeated, almost in a whisper, then she took a step closer to me. "Will you come over later?"

Once again a "Wha—?" escaped me.

"No one's sharing my room with me."

There were five girls on the trip. When they split up two to a room, there was one left over. And of course, Mei was that one.

"I'm in room two-twenty-three. On the opposite end from your room."

"…Do you think I should?"

"I told you there was something I'd tell you later, remember? I want to keep that promise."

"…Okay."

"And also…"

Just then, over Mei's shoulder, I saw Teshigawara. He was standing in front of the door, ogling us with a "well, well!" look on his face.

I got flustered and before Mei could finish, I said, "Okay, okay. I get it."

“How about ten o’clock or so?”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

“All right.”

Mei turned smoothly on her heel and went back into the building by herself. I waited a few seconds, then followed her inside. Just as I’d expected, as soon as I was inside the front door, Teshigawara pounced.

“Hey, there.”

He thumped me on the back.

“Major score, Sakaki. I heard you guys planning your little rendezvous.”

“Hold it, what do you mean ‘rendezvous’? It’s not like that.”

“Don’t get so embarrassed! I’ll never tell a soul.”

“Cut it out. You’re just making stuff up. Me and her have something serious to talk about, okay?”

“A serious talk about your future together?”

Teshigawara’s unrelenting needling got me kind of irritated, so I told him, “Seriously, I’m getting angry.”

He just put his hands in the air with a jovial “Woah, woah.” But…

At some point I had detected that, despite the way he was acting and talking, there wasn’t the slightest hint of a smile in his eyes.

Chapter 15

August II

1

I told Mochizuki, who was sharing my room, the overall situation and then slipped out of the room before ten o'clock.

Putting my cell phone in my pocket before I left was a reflex. No, that's not quite true. Everything that had just happened in the dining hall must have imprinted the idea on me. That it was better to have my cell phone with me in case of emergency. After all, I'd connected with Mei's phone once tonight, even if the signal had been terrible…

I encountered no one on my walk down the shadowy second floor corridor from room 202 to room 223. Apparently everyone was following Mr. Chibiki's instructions and obediently shutting themselves in their rooms.

Outside Mei's room, I glanced through a window in the hall.

The wind was as fierce as ever, but it looked as though the rain had stopped. The clouds blanketing the sky had grown diffuse, revealing the ghostly round glow of the moon. In its light, I could make out the somber shapes of the wood surrounding the yard.

Just this side of the forest, in a corner of the back lawn, I noticed a small, one-story building. It wasn't even big enough to be called an annex or a side building. Maybe a shed or a tool house.

Observing the scene absentmindedly, I watched as a window in the building suddenly lit up. Apparently someone had just now

turned on a light inside.

It wasn't enough to make me seriously question who it could have been. Obviously, it would be one of the Numatas. They'd probably gone out there to get something they needed.

I moved away from the window, took one slow, deep breath, and then knocked on the door to room 223.

After a long moment, Mei opened the door. She had a lightweight ivory cardigan on over her summer uniform and her complexion looked even more waxen than usual.

"Go ahead," she said tersely, gesturing me in without even a smile. The night wasn't that hot, and yet the air conditioner in her room was pumping at full strength. "Sit down, at least."

It was the same thing she'd told me the first time I'd been allowed up to the living room in her house. I settled myself lightly in the chair at the table next to the window. Mei sat down on the edge of one of the two beds in the room; then, out of the blue, she said, "We were talking about Misaki."

She turned an unflinching gaze on me. I nodded silently.

Naturally, the "Misaki" she was referring to was not the "Misaki" of twenty-six years ago, nor the "Misaki" of her own last name, nor even the "Misaki" that was the town she lived in. She meant her cousin, Misaki Fujioka, who had died at the Yumigaoka Municipal Hospital that day at the end of April.

"I've honestly been thinking about it ever since I first saw you at the hospital, wondering why you got off the elevator at the second

basement level."

I spoke as if to refresh my own memory.

"Misaki was hospitalized there, but that was the day she passed away, right? So her body was in the memorial chapel on the second basement level, right? And you said you were taking that doll to her. But even so…"

"You thought it seemed odd?"

"Well, yeah."

"The situation is a little complicated."

Mei lowered her eyes as she spoke.

"I never really wanted to tell anyone this, but…"

"Do you mind if I ask? Will you tell me?"

After a slight pause, her eyes still lowered, Mei replied, "Okay."

2

"Misaki Fujioka and I were cousins. We were the same age. But—how should I put it? **We didn't start out that way.**"

Mei lifted her eyes slightly as she began speaking, her voice soft. She had chosen such a suggestive way to lead into her story. I cocked my head, struggling to extract the meaning behind her words.

She went on, unconcerned: "Misaki's mother's name is Mitsuyo, and my mother—Kirika's real name is Yukiyo. They were sisters,

exactly the same age."

"You mean they're—" I cut in, my head still cocked to one side. "They're twins?"

"Fraternal, apparently. And their last name is Amane. They said that my Grandma Amane never got married her whole life."

I thought "Grandma Amane" was Mei's great-aunt on her mother's side—the old woman in "Twilight of Yomi"?

"They're fraternal twins, but even so they looked a lot alike, and they grew up in the same environment, were raised the same way, all the way to adulthood…Mitsuyo was the first to get married. She married a man named Fujioka. I've heard he was an office worker at a small food-related company, very young and no-nonsense.

"A little while later, Yukiyo married Kotaro Misaki—my father. He's a competent businessman, rich, and flies all over the place all year round. Pretty much the exact opposite of Mitsuyo's husband, you might say.

"And Mitsuyo was the first to have kids, with her husband Mr. Fujioka."

"And that was Misaki?"

Mei nodded in silence, then her eyes slid smoothly in my direction and she added, **"And one other."**

"What?"

"She had twins."

Mei's eyes dropped again.

“Two girls. Who were also fraternal twins, but they also looked amazingly alike.”

Misaki Fujioka had a twin sister?

I cocked my head to one side yet again.

Then could that mean…? Impossible.

“Meanwhile, Yukiyo got pregnant, too, a year after Mitsuyo. But there were problems when her baby was born.”

“You told me about that.”

“Yukiyo was incredibly, incredibly sad. To the point that she was going crazy. The sucker punch came when she learned that, because of the stillbirth, she wouldn’t be able to have any more children in the future.”

“…Man.”

It was at this point that I started to get an inkling of what was coming.

“The Fujioka family, which had been blessed with twins, also had some financial concerns and weren’t sure that they would be able to raise two children at the same time. In contrast, the Misaki household needed to do something to save Yukiyo’s spirit, which had fallen into the deepest despair. I’m sure Mitsuyo felt sorry for Yukiyo, too. And so at that point, you could say the balance was struck between supply and demand.”

“Supply…and demand?”

“Yeah. You know what I mean, right?” Mei asked, never spoiling

her quiet narrative. “One of the twins born to the Fujiokas was sent to the Misakis as a foster daughter.”

“So then…”

“That was me. I changed from Mei Fujioka to Mei Misaki when I was around two years old. I don’t have any memory that might suggest why I was chosen instead of Misaki.”

Mei broke off subtly at that point, and then continued, as if to push the question away.

“I figure it was probably because of our names.”

“Your names?”

“If Misaki had been adopted by the Misakis, she’d be Misaki Misaki. I’ve decided to think that they made the decision based on some stupid reason like that.”

A ghost of a smile came over her pale, peach-like lips before quickly disappearing.

“And so, since before I can remember, I’ve been raised in the Misaki family as Yukiyo’s—as Kirika’s only daughter. Without ever being told that I was adopted. So when I was younger, I was totally convinced that Mitsuyo was **my Aunt Mitsuyo**. And I thought that Misaki was my cousin, who was the same age as me and just happened to look a lot like me. Even knowing that we had the same birthday, it was just like, wow! What a coincidence! Chalk it up to our moms being twins, I guess.

“I was in the fifth year of elementary school, I think, when I found out the truth. Grandma Amane let something slip by accident, and

then she explained it to me, but that day Kirika…my mother completely lost it. I think she would have kept it hidden from me my whole life if she could have."

Despite the fact that she was revealing something significant about her own origins, Mei's tone was unutterably soft and her expression almost perfectly still. Having no idea how best to react, all I could do for a long while was listen to her talk.

"For her, I was essentially a substitute for her own stillborn child. A replacement. It was something similar for my father, too. I think they cherished me more than most people would have. And when I had the issue with my eye, they did everything they could for me, and my mother even made this special glass eye for me…I'm grateful to them. But…"

I'm one of that woman's dolls.

"But a replacement is still a replacement. At some point, she started to see her own child, the one she should have had, in me."

I'm alive, but I'm not the real thing.

"I'm sure the reason she shuts herself up in her workshop and keeps creating all those dolls is because of the intense heartbreak she still has deep down for her child. I can't help thinking that. And from my point of view, once I found out the truth, she's been nothing but the mother who raised me, not my actual mom…"

Mei's words trailed off, so I interjected a question. "So what did you think when you found out?"

After much fumbling over her words, Mei replied, "I…wanted to

see her. My mother, Mitsuyo. And my father."

I thought I saw her cheeks flush with the words, though only slightly.

"I didn't intend to be bitter or blame them for sending me out to be adopted instead of Misaki. I really didn't. I just wanted to see them and have a real talk with them and confirm the fact that these were the people who had given me life.

"But around then, the Fujiokas moved away. Until then, Misaki and I had gone to neighboring elementary schools and our houses were pretty close to each other's, but then Misaki changed schools and even though we lived in the same city, our houses were far apart and we couldn't see each other very easily anymore. Even so, I wanted to see my mother, and I told Kirika that. She got such a sad look on her face when I said that, and then she got so angry…"

"What, because she didn't want to let you see your birth mother?"

"Right." Mei nodded, her shoulders slumping very slightly. "I think I mentioned this before. How she's hands-off about making up rules for where I can go and what I can do, but she worries a lot and gets really sensitive about **certain things**."

"Yeah…I remember."

"That's what I meant. Getting closer to my mother Mitsuyo. I think it's natural for her to be nervous about it. Especially because the other woman is her own twin sister. Forcing me to have a cell phone is probably a manifestation of that anxiety. We're always **connected** by it. I kind of understand how she feels, but still…"

Again Mei fumbled for words for a moment.

“But…While all that was going on, I would sometimes meet up with Misaki secretly. Especially after we moved up to middle school and we started participating in more activities. And around that time, she found out that the two of us were originally sisters, too.

“Maybe it was a strange idea, but she and I felt this unbreakable **connection**. We’d been linked by sharing time together inside the same mother. We were each half of the other, which is such a clichéd thing to say, but that’s how it seemed.

“Oh, but in case you’re wondering, I don’t think it felt that nice. This mysterious sensation…that **my other half is right over there**…that was the strongest impression I got. Beyond that, well, Misaki had grown up in a family with her real mom and dad, while her other self had been sent to live with a foster family, where she had even lost an eye as a young child…I might have come out a little more cynical than her.”

All of a sudden, the windowpane rattled violently. Had the wind shifted direction? I started to feel as if someone were peering in through the window from outside—though that was impossible—and I instinctively turned to look behind me.

“Around then…This was happening last spring. That’s when Misaki got sick.”

Mei continued with her story.

“It was a really serious illness, in her kidneys. She would have to be on dialysis the rest of her life. The only way to avoid that was to

get a kidney transplant."

"A transplant…"

"Yeah. So Misaki got one kidney from her mother, Mitsuyo, and got admitted to a big hospital in Tokyo for the surgery. Actually, I wanted to give her my kidney. I mean, we were twins, even if just fraternal, and we were the same size, so wouldn't you think that's the best option for a transplant? They said transplanting an adult's kidney into a child was pretty hard, what with the size difference and everything, so…

"But apparently there's some guideline that says children under fifteen years old can't be live organ donors, so I couldn't do it. No matter how much I swore I wanted to. Although…Even if the hospital had made an exception, if she—if Kirika had found out, she would have dug her heels in and refused to let me do it."

So that had been the "major surgery at another hospital" Misaki Fujioka had had before coming to the municipal hospital. All at once, Ms. Mizuno's voice reawakened vividly in my mind, speaking those same words over the phone, and I squeezed my eyes shut reflexively.

"The surgery was at the beginning of the year and it was a complete success. But they needed to monitor her progress afterward, so when her condition stabilized, Misaki transferred to the hospital here. Even after the transfer, her recovery was on schedule. I would secretly go and visit her. Without telling Kirika what I was doing, of course.

"Misaki and I talked about all sorts of things, but then she said,

‘You have all those amazing dolls at your house. I’m so jealous.’ So I made her a promise. I showed her a picture of the dolls in my room and asked her which one she liked, and I told her ‘I’ll give you the one you like best to celebrate when you get out of the hospital.’ And that…”

“That was the doll you took to the memorial chapel that day?”

“…I promised her.”

Mei blinked slowly, sadly.

“I never thought she would die like that, all of a sudden…I really didn’t. She wasn’t having any problems in her recovery and they were saying she’d be able to go home soon. And yet, all of a sudden, she…”

…Right.

Ms. Mizuno had said that, too.

Misaki Fujioka’s condition had taken a sudden turn and before anyone could do anything, she had passed away. That had been April 27, a Monday. Ms. Mizuno had told me, *“**She was an only child**, and apparently her parents were incoherent with grief.”*

Certainly, I’d gotten an answer to the question that had so long been on my mind, but when I imagined what must be going through Mei’s mind, my heart clenched tight. It was hard to keep the tears from pouring down my face. However, at the same time…

A critical fact became inescapably clear.

“So she was never your cousin in the first place: You were

sisters."

Feeling an intense, tumultuous bewilderment, I reiterated the fact.

"Meaning that **you and Misaki were actually second-degree blood relatives…**"

"That's right."

"So that's why you said what you did that day?"

My first day at school, the first time I'd encountered her there. During that conversation next to the flower bed where yellow roses were in full bloom, outside Building Zero…

You should be careful. It might have started already.

"When you told me 'It might have started already'?"

"You've got a good memory. That's right."

"So it had started," I said, my eyes locked on Mei's face. **"The 'disasters' for this year had already started in April."**

"…Probably."

"Why didn't you say so at the time?"

"I…Well, I…"

Without turning her eyes in my direction, Mei once again blinked, slow and sad.

"The fact that something like that had caused her—had caused Misaki's death…I didn't want to believe it. I could accept that something as irrational as a curse had caused it. So I…

"That's why even when you asked me if I had any brothers or sisters, I couldn't say yes. And when you asked me about Misaki, I could only say that she was my **cousin**. I didn't want to say it."

I remembered that.

After Yukari Sakuragi died as one the "deaths of May," when I'd run into Mei for the second time in the basement of the gallery, she'd said, *I guess I've only ever half believed it, in the back of my mind*.

***First that happened**, then in May you came to our school and I **told you all that stuff**, but I still didn't believe it a hundred percent.*

"First that happened" must have meant Misaki's death in April. And then if "telling me all that stuff" had been an **allusion** to her saying that "it might have started already"…

Mei's head was bent, her fists balled around the sheets on the bed where she sat. Even as I tried earnestly once again to imagine what she must be feeling, I compiled the **facts I had come to understand** and couldn't help speaking them aloud, sounding out the truth of them.

"The 'disasters' for this year's third-year Class 3 started in April, just like they did for all those other classes. When Misaki Fujioka died in the hospital, she became the first victim…The 'death of April.' Which means…"

The gusts of wind rattling the window barreled into my body and clamped sharply down on my body heat. When that sudden sensation assaulted me, a chill carved down my spine and raised

goose bumps over my entire body.

Mei's head moved as if to say, *I know*...She lifted her face languidly. "I thought of that, too."

"Meaning what?"

"After you got out of the hospital, you first came to school at the beginning of May. That was when we realized there weren't enough desks in the classroom, so everyone believed that **this year's 'disasters' were erratic and starting in May**. But if Misaki was the 'death of April,' that would mean **we were wrong**…"

"…Yeah, it would."

Folding both arms over my chest and hugging tight, I nodded.

"Meaning that despite the fact that there were originally enough desks, **the 'extra person' had already snuck into the class back in April, before I ever came to North Yomi**…"

3

"So that's why, then?"

After several seconds of silence, I asked the question timidly.

"When I said I was wondering if I might be the 'extra person,' you flat-out told me I wasn't. You told me 'Relax. It's not you.'"

"…I did, yes."

"Is that because you knew the 'disasters' had actually started in

April? And since I wasn't in the class in April…?"

"That's part of it…But the main reason is something else."

I felt as if I'd had some sort of premonition that Mei would answer this way.

"Meaning what?" I pursued. "What was your reason?"

"I…"

She started to answer, but then showed some hesitation. Her gaze slipped away into space and for a long moment she didn't even blink, her body frozen and doll-like. Then, finally…

She seemed to have come to a decision. She got up from the bed and turned back to face me. She let me see the eye patch over her left eye, which had been turned away from my view this entire time. Then, with measured movements, she uncovered her eye.

"This eye…"

The special glass eye that rested in her empty eye socket. The "blue eye, empty to all" turned on me.

"This 'doll's eye' told me **it's not you**."

I didn't understand what she meant right away, of course. Still, I felt a vague foreboding somewhere inside me.

"How did it do that?" I asked, yet another question.

This was Mei's reply, no longer hesitant: "I think I told you this before. This eye can see things that aren't visible. Things that you wouldn't expect to see; things that shouldn't be seen; things that

you wish it couldn't see."

"Things you wouldn't expect to see? Things that shouldn't be seen? Like what?"

"I think it's…"

Mei lifted her right hand and with it she covered the eye that was not the "doll's eye."

"The 'color of death.'"

She sounded as if she were intoning a spell.

"The color or the tint of something that's on the other side, with death."

I didn't speak.

"Do you understand? No—I can see you don't."

To be honest, I didn't know how I should respond. However—

"Under normal circumstances, I don't think you could believe me, even after I explain it…But I may as well tell you everything. Will you hear me out?"

When she said that, I nodded deeply without a second thought. And then I looked straight back into the eye she had turned on me. The beautiful and yet utterly vacant blue eye…

"Let's hear it," I told her.

“At first, I didn’t really understand what was happening, so I was confused and upset all the time.”

Leaving her eye patch off, Mei sat back down on the edge of the bed. She told me the story in the same quiet tone she’d used all night.

“Obviously, I lost the sight in my left eye when I lost the eye. Even if you put a flashlight right up to it, I can’t detect even a flicker of light. If I close my right eye, I can’t see anything at all. I had the surgery when I was around four years old, so I’ve been this way as far back as I can remember. Even after Kirika made this ‘doll’s eye’ for me to put in, it was still like that for a while. But then…

“What was it at first? I’m pretty sure it was when one of my father’s relatives died and they took me to the funeral. It was either the end of my third year in elementary school or the start of my fourth.

“They said ‘This is good-bye’ and I put flowers in the coffin… And when I looked at the face of the person who’d died, I felt something really strange. My left eye shouldn’t have been able to see anything, but I felt like it was sensing something…Not a shape. More like a color.

“I was shocked. Since that was basically the first time I’d ever felt something in my left eye. And it was a truly strange sensation. When I covered my left eye up and only looked through my right eye, all I saw was the person’s face, completely normal. And yet when I used my left eye, too, there was some kind of weird color tingeing my vision, overlaying everything else…”

“What do you mean, a weird color?” I asked.

“I can’t really explain it,” Mei replied, shaking her head limply. “It was a color I’d never seen with my right eye…a color I never could have seen with it. I can’t express it with words like red or blue or yellow or any of the names for colors I know. None of those fit. It’s…a color that doesn’t exist in our world.”

“Not even if you could mix together any colors of paint that exist?”

“…Not even then.”

“And that’s the ‘color of death’?”

“I couldn’t have understood that at first…”

Tilting her head back to look at the ceiling, Mei gave a short sigh.

“No one would really talk to me about it. Doctors would examine me, but they never found anything abnormal. They told me I was just imagining it. I tried to believe them, too, but…Every so often, I kept seeing the same thing, and it didn’t go away. So—”

Mei slowly returned her gaze to me.

“Over the course of however many years, I’ve come to understand it. When I sense that color, it means ‘death’ is there.”

“You mean ‘death’ is there every time you look at a dead person’s face?”

“It happened once when I was at the scene of a car accident. There was a man trapped in the driver’s seat of a crushed car. His face was covered in blood…He was already dead. I could sense the same

color in his face as I'd seen at the funeral.

"And it's not just when I see something in person. Say, on the news, when they show clips or photos from the scene of accidents or wars. It almost never happens with TV or newspapers, but magazines have pictures of dead bodies in them sometimes. When I look at stuff like that, I see it."

"That same **color**?"

"I'm not sure. There are lots of degrees."

"What?"

"Sometimes I sense it clearly, and sometimes it's hazy. You could call it different shades of the same color. When someone's actually dead, it's clear and when someone's badly hurt and is going to die soon or they're on their deathbed from a terrible illness, then it's comparatively faint."

"So it's not just on dead people that you sense this **color**."

"Right. In those cases, I think it's because the person is close to 'death.' They've come closer to 'death' than normal, closer than necessary…And their essence is being pulled toward the side of 'death.' That's why it's faint. Less a **color** and more a **shade**…You know?

"I can't stand big hospitals. Grandma Amane was hospitalized once to have surgery on a tumor, and she was okay because they'd found it early, but when we went to visit her…That was hard. I was scared. Without even trying, I could see all kinds of patients in her ward tinged by 'shades of death'…

"It's not prophecy or some kind of power like that. I can see the color on people who are badly hurt or seriously ill, but if I were to meet a person who's going to die in an accident later on, I wouldn't see anything. So I think maybe this is like detecting the **'mortality' component** a person has in them."

I couldn't offer any response.

"To be honest, I wasn't very excited going to the hospital to visit Misaki, either, because I would sense it sometimes. But I never once sensed it on Misaki. That reassured me; I thought she would be all right, and then…And then all of a sudden she—"

Mei bit down on her lower lip out of grief, or maybe remorse. Her lips were pressed together for a long moment before she went on.

"You must be wondering why this eye can see that sort of thing, how it got that way. I call it the 'color of death,' but I only see it on humans. I don't sense anything for other animals…Isn't that strange? It's so weird.

"I wondered, too, and I was scared, and I hated it. I thought about it from every conceivable angle, but I don't know. I don't understand it, but I can't escape it. All I can do is accept it. And so eventually I started to think of it like this:

"Maybe it's because of the emptiness in dolls."

The dolls are empty.

Ah…This, too, Mei had told me when I'd run into her in the basement of the gallery.

Dolls are emptiness. Their bodies and hearts are total

emptiness…a void. That emptiness is like death.

"Dolls are empty, you know. They contain an emptiness that parallels 'death'…Maybe that's why this left eye that I share with them illuminates the 'color of death' in human beings. Or maybe it has something to do with my experience during my eye surgery, where I could have died."

At the time, as I listened to her talk, I remembered feeling as if she had allowed me a glimpse of a secret underpinning the world.

"All I could do was accept that explanation. But there's no way I could ever talk to anyone about this. I never even fully explained it to Misaki. I couldn't. And then, at a certain point, I decided I would just keep this eye covered, especially around other people."

"…I see."

Even as I gave her a solemn nod, in the rational part of my mind I never stopped thinking it over. How seriously could I take this story Mei was telling me?

However, without revealing that to her, I wore an earnest expression as I asked, "So then, what about ghosts? Have you ever seen any? The spirits of people who've died, or anything like that?"

"No…Never," Mei replied, her face just as serious. "I mean, I have no idea if those things exist the way everybody talks about them, or whether they haunt all these different places people claim they do. Though I think, fundamentally, they probably don't."

"What about paranormal photographs?"

Naturally, this was a question with a point.

“Not those, either.”

She didn’t move.

“Those photos they show on TV and in magazines, they all look so fake. But that’s why—”

At that point, Mei’s expression seemed to sharpen.

“That’s why I wanted to get a look at that photo from twenty-six years ago. I wanted to look at the real thing with this eye and make sure.”

“Sure. And when you saw it…”

The day before yesterday, when she’d come to my house and looked at the photos my mother had left behind, she’d taken the eye patch off her left eye. And then she’d asked me—

What about the color?

That question.

You don’t see a weird color?

“What did you see?” I asked. “Did you see the ‘color of death’ on that student in the picture, Misaki Yomiyama?”

“I did,” she replied instantly. That was the first time I’ve ever looked at something people said was a paranormal photo and sensed the **color** like that. So it has to be…”

My eyes fixed on Mei’s lips as she trailed off, and the memory came belatedly back to me.

I know that I’m not “the casualty.”

The words she'd spoken that day I'd visited her house and we'd had that long talk in her living room on the third floor.

When I'd pursued her claim and asked, *So you can be sure that you're not "the casualty," huh?* she had started to explain, *I'm telling you*...and then she had stopped herself.

"I hope that explains it," Mei said, slowly rising from the bed once again. "When I take my eye patch off and look at you like this, I still can't see the 'color of death' on you. So it's not you. You're not the 'extra person.'"

"And you know that **it's not you**, either, for the same reason."

"Yeah."

Nodding, Mei picked up her eye patch. She started to put it back in place and then stopped as if thinking better of it.

"If nothing else, I believe in the mysterious abilities of this 'doll's eye.' But if I search deep down inside myself, I think there's still a part of me that doesn't totally buy it. I still find myself doubting it sometimes, thinking maybe it's nothing more than a delusion.

"Maybe it is only a delusion, but I just told you 'it's not a prophecy or some kind of power like that,' right? But I feel like, at least for me, it might be. If Death were to come after me sometime in my future, maybe I'd be able to tell somehow. If I could make the right moves, maybe in certain cases I'd be able to escape that Death…Remember that one time, you said you were worried about me going home alone? And I said I'd be fine? That's why."

…Right.

I did remember that.

“Let’s say I believe everything you just told me…”

As I replied, I also rose from my chair. The chills and goose bumps had stopped. Instead, despite the air-conditioning making the room as cold as it was, the back of my neck was slick with sweat.

I was a little over one meter from Mei. She had both her eyes open —left and right—and her gaze was fixed on me. Behind me, the window shook violently once again.

“Then that means you know who it is?”

Who is “the casualty”...?

“That you looked with your ‘doll’s eye’ and now you know who the ‘extra person’ in our class is?”

Mei shifted her head in an ambiguous way that neither confirmed nor denied what I’d said. Then she replied, “I’ve tried not to take my eye patch off when I’m at school.

“Ever since I started third year and found out the facts behind the ‘curse’ from all the rumors, even after the start of the new semester, I’ve never taken it off. Not even after what happened to Misaki, or after you transferred to our school…Not even after Sakuragi died and I finally started to believe that the ‘disasters’ were something real, I never…”

“Even though you wrote that message on your desk?”

Who is "the casualty"...?

"Even though you might have been able to tell who it was just by taking your eye patch off?"

"Even if I found out—even if I knew who it was, I didn't think there was anything I could do about it. I didn't think it would help anything to know. I wondered about it, but…You see?"

To be honest, I wasn't much inclined to accept Mei's response just then.

It was true, I'd never seen her without her eye patch on at school. But could she honestly say she had never once let it slip off? Had she never tried to discover the answer to her riddle—**Who is "the casualty"?** How could she ever stop thinking about it, otherwise?

But then…

Even if she had, that was in the past. Quibbling about it now accomplished nothing. The problem was in the present moment.

"In that case…"

I rested a hand on my chest and took a deep breath. Maybe it was the incredible stress, or maybe just my imagination, but I felt a slight pain that summoned back the memories of that obnoxious collapsed lung.

"What about after that? What about now?"

Now that she'd heard what was on that fifteen-year-old tape that Katsumi Matsunaga had hidden. Now that she could no longer claim there was nothing she could do if she knew who it was.

"Do you know? Can you see them? Is **the person** here on this trip?"

Mei's eyebrows trembled, as if my barrage of questions had thrown her slightly off balance. She was reluctant to answer. I thought she might even put a hand to her chest and take a deep breath like I had done, when her perplexed gaze fled to one side and she bit down softly on her lower lip again.

Finally, she gave a terse bob of her head.

"The 'extra person' is here."

"…So they did come."

Sweat rolled down my skin under my shirt. I fixed my eyes on Mei's lips.

"Who is it?"

"I don't…"

Just then, a loud noise came from the door to the room and put a stop to the discussion. Someone outside was pounding on the door. Not like a knock—more like someone's body had crashed into it.

"Who's there?"

Simultaneous with Mei's question, the door was knocked open violently. The second I saw who came tumbling inside, I forgot what I'd been doing only seconds before and shouted loudly,

“Teshigawara?! What happened?”

5

Just by looking at him, I could tell something was off.

His breathing was oddly labored, as if he’d just run flat-out all the way here. His shirt clung to the sweat coating his skin. His hair and face were dripping with sweat, too. And yet he was terribly pale. His expression was rigid and his eyes looked unfocused.

“What happened? Is there…”

When I moved closer to him, Teshigawara made a choking noise and he shook his head fiercely. Then he looked from my face to Mei’s and back again. Showing no reaction whatsoever to the fact that Mei had her eye patch off, he finally formed the words—between heaving breaths—“Y-yeah. Sorry. L-look, sorry to bust in here, but…Could I ask you guys a question?”

He wanted to ask *us* a question? That was weird. Unquestionably weird. *You feeling okay, Teshigawara?* What in the world was…

“I just want to ask something, real quick.”

His breathing still ragged, Teshigawara maneuvered past me and headed for the window. The window faced the inner garden, surrounded by the building on three sides, and had a balcony attached that allowed a person to stand outside.

He went up to it, then turned back to look at us.

“S-so, do you guys know anyone named Tomohiko Kazami?”

He threw the question out there.

“Say what?”

My head tilted to one side reflexively. Mei’s reaction was about the same.

“Could I get a little context?”

“Look, I’m just asking you a question. **Do you know who Kazami is?** Could you describe him?”

Repeating his question, though, Teshigawara’s voice was as serious as I’d ever heard it.

“Sure, I know him, but that’s not—” I answered his question, the weight of a terrible premonition closing in on me. “He’s the class representative for the boys in Class 3. Your friend from way back.”

“Oh-h-h ma-a-an…”

Teshigawara’s face twisted and he groaned.

“…What about you, Misaki? Do you know him?”

“Of course I know who he is.”

Teshigawara groaned, “Oh man,” again and then feebly murmured, “Y-Yeah, of course.”

His knees buckled and he collapsed into a squat. Pale as he was, his face lost even more color and a fine tremor played across his lips.

“Come on, Teshigawara, why are you asking? What happened?”

He stayed squatting on the floor, but when I walked up to him, his head swung haggardly back and forth. “This is bad,” he answered in a voice like a smashed toad. “Something real bad…”

“What are you talking about?”

“Maybe I was wrong…”

“Wrong? About what?”

“I…Look, I was convinced he was the ‘extra person.’ So just now, I…”

“‘He’? You mean…”

Was he talking about Kazami?

“Kazami.”

“…You didn’t.”

“I killed him.”

He **killed him**? Had he really murdered Kazami?

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why would I lie about that?” Teshigawara cradled his head in both hands. “I’ve been checking into him lately, on the sly. Talking to him about all this stuff from when we were kids, seeing if he remembers it or not, you know. And he…”

“No…Really?”

“He was acting weird, I swear,” Teshigawara appealed to us, his voice almost a sob. “I asked about this place, our secret base by the

river where we played all the time when we were third-years in elementary school, and he just said, 'I don't remember that.' I asked him about the summer of our fifth year in elementary school, when we wanted to ride our bikes all the way to see the ocean, but in the end we gave up as soon as we were outside town. And he said 'That doesn't sound familiar.' So…"

"So what?"

"I wasn't really sure whether that was a sign or not, at first, but then I thought about it and thought about it, and it started to seem suspicious…So I thought he wasn't himself. That the real Kazami had died a long time ago and this Kazami was the 'extra person' who'd snuck into our class this spring…"

Wow, I mean—Teshigawara had seriously misunderstood things. The "extra person"/"casualty" probably wasn't going to act like that.

As far as I understood from Mei's and Mr. Chibiki's explanations, you couldn't ask if **it** was the "real thing" or a "fake." **It** was the "real thing" through and through: The actual person who'd died came back to life without any awareness that they had already been a "casualty" and slipped back into the world. So it didn't mean anything if they could remember stuff from when they were little. It wouldn't be a clue or give you any proof to help you identify them. And yet…

The kinds of childhood experiences Teshigawara was talking about were memories that might have faded or disappeared for anyone. And yet…

"And then tonight, a little while ago, I…tricked him into coming

with me."

His voice thickening now and again, Teshigawara described what had happened.

"I was sharing a room with him, but I didn't want anyone in the next room to overhear, so I took him somewhere else. I'd found a rec room at one end of the second floor, so I said we should go check it out…

"When we got there, I psyched myself up and then I tore into him. *You're not the real Kazami, are you? You're the 'extra person' in our class, aren't you?* He got all shaken up, then he panicked, and then finally he blew up at me. So I thought, man, look how guilty he's acting. And like it said on that tape, if he dies…I had to return him to Death to save everyone."

"…So you killed him?" I controlled my voice, which was threatening to turn a little hysterical. "Really?"

"At first it was like a shoving match with a bunch of arguing. I didn't think 'Okay, time to kill him' and then start hitting him or anything…Aggh, I don't even know what I was thinking. Somehow we wound up outside on the balcony. And then before I realized it, he…"

"He fell?"

"…Yeah."

"Did you push him?"

"…I might have."

“And that killed him?”

“He was lying on the ground, and he wasn’t moving. His head was bleeding, too.”

“Okay…”

“But right then, I got spooked. I couldn’t stop shaking.”

Teshigawara lifted one knee to his chest and dug into his sweaty hair with both hands.

“I ran out into the hallway…and came here. ’Cause I knew you were coming to Misaki’s room. I thought I should tell you guys first.”

“What about Mochizuki?”

“You can’t rely on that guy.”

“…In any case, why did you ask us those questions?”

“’Cause of that tape. Remember?”

Teshigawara lowered his hands from his hair and looked up at my face. His bloodshot eyes were rimmed with tears that seemed ready to pour down his face any second.

“Like Katsumi Matsunaga said, after he killed the ‘extra person’ on the camping trip fifteen years ago…You heard what he said, right? As soon as the ‘extra person’ died, **he ceased to exist**. No one in the whole class remembered that he’d ever been there, except for Matsunaga, ’cause he’s the one who did it. That’s why I…”

“You wanted to make sure if Kazami was really the ‘extra person’

or not."

"Right. But you said you know who he is."

Teshigawara's shoulders heaved. His voice desperate, he asked me, "Did I really get it wrong? Sakaki—did I?"

Searching for a way to answer him, I saw two possibilities at this point, when considered calmly.

The first was that the "extra person" was not Tomohiko Kazami, just as Teshigawara feared. In other words, the possibility that Teshigawara had "gotten it wrong."

The other was the possibility that even if the "extra person" was Tomohiko Kazami, he wasn't dead yet. As far as I knew from what Teshigawara had told us, he hadn't gone down from the balcony to check if Kazami was truly deceased. So he might still be…

"He might not be dead."

"What?"

"Falling from the second story wouldn't necessarily kill him. He could still be breathing but just unconscious."

"Oh, man—"

Teshigawara got unsteadily to his feet and turned to the window. He reached out, practically pitching forward, to open the window and stepped out onto the balcony. I hurried after him.

A humid breeze blew against us. In the sickly light of the moon, pouring down between the clouds…

Pressing his chest against the railing of the balcony, slippery still from the rain, Teshigawara stretched his right arm out diagonally ahead. To the left of the front door, on one end of the building's second floor…There we saw the cloudy glow of several lit windows. That must have been the rec room.

"There…It was over there."

Teshigawara pointed in that direction.

"Argh. I can't see him from here. It's on the other side of that bush…"

It was at this point that I took my cell phone from my pocket. I was planning to call the police or an ambulance. Spotting my movement, Teshigawara said, "H-hey, Sakaki. You'd sell your friend out to the cops?"

"Don't be stupid!" I replied, my mind flashing back to that detective I'd met.

That older detective who'd questioned me about Ms. Mizuno's accident, and whom I had run into once on the street outside the school. His name was Oba. He'd told me he had a daughter in elementary school. He'd written his cell phone number on the back of a business card and told me, "If you ever think I might be able to help…" I had put the number in my address book, in case there was ever anything. If we told him what had happened, he would probably understand, to a certain extent.

I moved away from Teshigawara and rushed to try the number. However…

It didn’t go through.

When I checked the screen, I saw a single bar. But the phone wouldn’t connect.

“Sakakibara?”

I heard Mei’s voice. She was looking through the window at me, not coming out onto the balcony.

She was quietly and yet emphatically shaking her head. And then she told me, in a low, controlled voice that Teshigawara wouldn’t hear: **“It’s not Kazami.”**

“…Oh.”

So her “doll’s eye” had told her “it’s not Kazami.” The “extra person” was someone else.

“Teshigawara!” I called, with force. “First of all, we need to go find out if he’s still alive. If he is, he needs first aid right away. Agreed?”

“Y-yeah,” Teshigawara replied without conviction, pulling his chest away from the railing.

Faced with the sagging defeat of this bleached puppet, I said, “Don’t give up and throw yourself over yet.” And I didn’t mean it as a joke.

“Um, right.”

“Hurry up. Let’s go.”

6

When we ran out of room 223, we headed straight for the front door. We ran down the corridor on the second floor until we reached the staircase in the center of the building, then ran down the stairs to the foyer. And on the way there…

I got a sudden strange feeling.

A premonition, a feeling in my bones…No, it wasn't quite that. Thinking about it rationally, there was no way it could have been anything as supernatural as that.

An echo…Yes. I felt an echo of something.

A strange kind of echo. An unsettling echo. A terrible echo. Thinking about it rationally, it had to be because of something I'd glimpsed in my quick scan of the area when we came down the stairs.

Teshigawara and Mei headed for the front door without a backward glance. I was the only one whose feet came to an involuntary halt.

I was in the foyer late at night, with the main lights all turned off. The hallway stretched away as if being sucked into the gloom. And there…

A single door stood open, though only a few centimeters. That's what I'd glimpsed.

The door to the dining hall?

No light spilled from within. It was darker even than the darkness of the hallway. Deep within the darkness visible through the gap in the door, I sensed something—something intensely disturbing. I suppose that was the origin of the "echo" I'd felt.

I was reluctant to call the others back. I drew nearer to the door without them and took the dully gleaming knob in my hand.

I felt it slip.

Was it sweat? No, this wasn't sweat. It was…

I took my hand off the knob and turned my palm up to squint at it. In the darkness, I could just barely make **something** out. It wasn't sweat. It was something darker that stained my palm. It was…

…Blood?

Blood? But why?

I had the option to withdraw and go after the others, who had rushed out ahead of me. But I couldn't do it. Before I'd even thought everything over, I had pushed the door open and moved into the dining hall. It was too dark to be able to see much, so I was moving ahead one step at a time, feeling along the wall, when…

"Ack!"

I let out a wild cry because, out of nowhere, something grabbed my ankle.

"Agh! Wh—"

What was that? Who was it?

I leapt back.

Something—someone was lying facedown on the floor. Since my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I could make out the shape thanks to the frail beams of moonlight slipping in through the windows at the back of the room.

"Wh…What the?"

I spoke to it, terrified.

"Who is it? What are you…"

It looked as if they were dressed in a student's summer uniform. And they were wearing pants, so it was a boy's uniform.

Since **he** was lying facedown, I couldn't see his face. I didn't know who it was. His right hand was thrown out in front of him. He must have grabbed my ankle with that hand. I'd been totally surprised by how sudden it had been, but the force behind the grip was incredibly feeble.

"Are you okay?"

I went back to his side and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, are all right? Why are you…"

His body twitched in response to my voice. I clamped my hand around his outstretched right hand. And then…

The same slippery sensation I'd felt on the doorknob was on his hand, too.

"Are you hurt?"

He groaned in a low, strained tone.

I put my hand back on his shoulder and tried to pull him up. But…

“Don’t bother…”

A reedier voice than any I might have imagined escaped his lips.

“It’s no use…”

“Why not?” I asked, when finally I noticed. On the white shirt he wore, a dark stain ran down his back to his hips. The shirt was soaked with blood.

“You…Were you stabbed?” I asked. I pressed my own cheek against the floor to get a look at his face. The dark and the fact that even his face was smeared with blood made it hard to recognize him, but…

“Maejima?”

Maejima, who’d been the one untiringly rubbing Wakui’s back when he suffered that asthma attack after dinner. Maejima with the small frame and baby face, who was for all that actually a warrior in the kendo club. I was almost positive it was him.

“How did this happen?”

I brought my mouth close to his ear.

“Did someone stab you? Did someone…”

He gave another low, pained moan, and then finally spoke in panting intervals. Almost as if he was using up the last of his

strength.

"P-pulled a kitchen…kitchen knife…"

"A kitchen knife? What happened?"

"Pulled it…Th-the care…taker…"

"The caretaker?" I shook Maejima's shoulder. "Mr. Numata? What did he do?"

I asked him question after question, but I got no further answer. I looked into his face, and this time his eyes were closed.

He must have lost consciousness. Or could he have died? I couldn't calm down and get myself together enough to check…

I lifted myself up and, battling the fear that had crystallized all in a moment, I started walking. Even without finding a light switch, just by the light of the moon I could make out the door to the kitchen all the way at the back of the room.

That old guy is so fishy.

The comments Teshigawara had treated me to only a few hours earlier in this very room played over again in my mind.

Ever since we got here, he's had this scary look in his eye when he's looking at us, y'know?

No…It couldn't be.

I bet you there are tons of old men who just lose it one day and kill their own grandkids or whatever.

He couldn't have…

Better not take your eyes off that guy.

When I'd reached the door to the kitchen, yet again I felt a strange hint of something. This time it wasn't due to information I'd gotten visually. It was auditory and olfactory…

I could hear a faint, unusual sound from behind the door; I didn't know what.

I could smell a faint, unusual odor—yes, from behind this door, but I didn't know what.

But…

You shouldn't open it. Don't open it. Defying the internal warnings, I reached out for the doorknob.

Instantly, my palm felt **heat**. Luckily it wasn't bad enough to burn me, but the knob itself was surprisingly hot.

Maybe I should have given the idea up at that point. But without hesitating, I turned the knob and then forcefully kicked the door the rest of the way open.

In that instant, I realized the source of the odd sound and of the odd smell. It was a fire.

Flames were burning through the entire room.

Intensely hot air and smoke billowed out at me, and I retreated hastily. I raised an arm in front of my face and stopped breathing. Even as I did it, in that same moment…

I caught sight of something, obvious in the light of the flames.

The form of **that man** lying in the kitchen, surrounded by flames.

His head was pointed in my direction. The fire was threatening to catch on his clothes any second. Even so, he didn't even flinch, possibly because he was already dead. Several **objects** plunged deeply into his neck and face were probably the immediate cause of death…And, if I wasn't mistaken, **those objects** were the metal skewers we'd used at dinner.

The flames raged. Even if there had been a fire extinguisher handy, it didn't seem as if that would stop them.

I ran back to where Maejima was lying, and shouted at him over and over. "Hey! Maejima! It's bad! There's a fire…Come on! If we don't get out of here, we're going to die!"

7

Maejima was breathing. I saw a tiny movement in response to my voice.

I was worried about his wounds and the amount of blood he'd lost, but there was absolutely no way I was leaving him here. I urged him, "Stay with me now!" over and over again in order to keep him alert, and somehow I managed to lift him up and drag him out to the hallway. The flames in the kitchen were already spreading into the dining room by that point.

I was pulling the door closed, thinking, *If I can just stop the fire from advancing, even for a second*…when—

“Where’d you go, Sakakibara?”

Someone called to me from the foyer. It was Mei. She must have come back to look for me since she’d lost sight of me.

“Why are you in—what the…?”

She stopped her advance toward me.

“Who is that?”

She wore her suspicion openly.

“What happened?”

“He’s hurt really badly,” I answered, shouting. “But there’s a fire in the kitchen!”

“A…A fire?”

“The caretaker…Mr. Numata is in there. Dead. He’s been murdered. And I bet the person who did it started that fire, too.”

Even as I was telling her the situation, my tongue tripping over the words, a thought whispered through my mind: *Oh.*

…It was then.

When I’d peered through a window in the hallway to look outside before going into Mei’s room at ten o’clock.

I’d seen a building like a storage shed in the backyard and a light on inside it. I’d accepted it at the time, thinking that the caretakers had probably gone to get something they needed out of it. But that…

It might have been the killer going in there after murdering Mr. Numata, or maybe going in before killing him to grab some kerosene

or something to start the fire afterward.

"Is that Maejima? What happened to him?"

"He was lying in the dining hall. It looks like he's been stabbed in the back with a knife. It's got to be the same person who did this."

"Are the cuts deep?"

"He's lost a lot of blood."

With Mei's help, each of us supporting Maejima on one side, we headed for the foyer. The wide-open front door finally came into sight.

"Can you get him out on your own?" Mei asked.

"Probably. But he needs treatment soon."

"You're right."

"Where's Teshigawara? And Kazami?"

"Kazami is fine. The ground is muddy from the rain, so that made it softer. He twisted his leg pretty badly, but he didn't hurt his head much. He woke up, too."

"That's good."

Taking on the dead weight of Maejima's body, I hurried toward the front door. As I went, Mei spun in a **180**.

"Hey…Where are you going?"

"I have to tell everyone about the fire."

She was totally right. But if she went back up to the second floor

now…

It was dangerous. Naturally there was the danger presented by the fire, but there might still be a murderer roaming the building with a knife, too…

“Hold on, Misaki.”

But by the time I spoke up to stop her, she had already run up the stairs. I wanted to go after her, but I had Maejima, who couldn’t move on his own. Feeling torn, I lifted his weight and took him outside.

I saw Teshigawara coming toward the front stoop. Beside him was Kazami, looking pained and caked in mud. His glasses were gone and had probably flown off his face when he fell. He was dragging his right leg behind him in obvious pain, and Teshigawara was lending him a shoulder.

“No! Get away from the building!” I ordered.

“Huh?” Teshigawara’s eyes landed on me. “Who’s that? Maejima? Sakaki, where did you…”

“There’s a fire!” I shouted. “A fire started in the kitchen, and I don’t think we can put it out. It might be arson.”

“No way! Are you kidding me?”

“Someone attacked Maejima. He’s hurt really bad.”

“Are you for real?!”

“Look, we have to get out of here!”

"R-right."

Each of us helping one of the wounded—Teshigawara with Kazami and me with Maejima—we got away from the stoop. Hobbling, slow and dragging, we moved down the path into the front yard.

At length, there came a violent noise from behind us. Turning around, to the right on the first floor—on the side where the dining hall was—I saw a window shatter and fire come roaring out. Fanned by the night's strong winds, the fire crawled up the outside wall of the building as I watched.

Just then I heard a shrill alarm bell from inside the lodge.

The automatic fire detector must have activated. Or else someone had activated it by hand. Either way, this ought to make everyone in their rooms on the second floor aware that something strange was happening. *Come on, everybody…Before the fire reaches you…*

I could hardly stand still because I was so worried about Mei's safety, but I knew I couldn't just dump Maejima here, as badly hurt as he was. There was Kazami to consider, too. He wasn't walking anywhere on his own, so I couldn't just ask Teshigawara to take Maejima for me, either.

The first thing I had to worry about was getting Maejima somewhere the fire wouldn't reach him.

Driving Teshigawara on, I summoned all the speed I was capable of to get away from the building. By now, several students who had been alerted to the fire were rushing out the front door and side

exits.

They were all panicked by the flames that continued to mount in intensity and spread over the building. They ran past us and fled toward the gate, trying to save themselves. Every last one of them was dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt or in pajamas. There were even some people who'd come running out in their slippers.

I couldn't get my body to respond the way I wanted it to, and I grew frantic. The heat and smoke really were chasing me down. In the roar of the flames I could hear, now and then, the sound of windows shattering. The sound of the building creaking.

At some point, Maejima's body suddenly felt much heavier.

"Stay with me. Fight," I called to him, but there was no apparent reaction. No way he'd start walking around on his own…

In the midst of all this…

I heard a scream.

Though it mingled with the many other strange noises rising out of the fire, it was clearly discernible…as a person screaming. A sharp, high-pitched shriek.

It came from above us, off at an angle.

When I looked up, I saw a person on a second-floor balcony. It was a room maybe two doors closer in from room 223, which we'd rushed out of not so long ago. I didn't think the flames had reached that area yet, but…I guessed that they weren't able to go into the hallway and were calling for help from the balcony.

...No.

I knew immediately that wasn't it.

I could see two people on the balcony.

From her build and hairstyle, one of them looked like Izumi Akazawa. The scream had probably come from her. And **the other** was…

"Stop it!"

The piercing voice shouting those words superimposed itself on my view of Akazawa.

"What's your problem?! Why are you—"

My eyes popped in horror. The **other person** on the balcony was, at this very moment, attempting to attack Akazawa. Their right hand was lifted high above their head. It might have held the very same knife that had stabbed Maejima…

"Stop!" Akazawa screamed. "Help me!"

The attacker and the victim—their forms tangled together on the balcony. And just then—

A monstrous sound deafened me. At the same moment, a blinding pillar of flame exploded from one corner at the back of the building…

An explosion?

That was an explosion.

Right—like the gas line in the kitchen. Considering the location,

a propane gas cylinder must have been installed somewhere. Had that caught fire?

I raised both arms reflexively, trying to protect my face from the waves of heat and the sparks raining down on me. Losing its support, Maejima's body slumped into a heap on the ground. Even as I rushed to do something, though…

My eyes went back to the second-floor balcony. And I caught the precise moment that the two grappling figures toppled over the railing, still locked together.

"What's happening?" I murmured, overcome, averting my eyes. I fixed my grip on Maejima's arm. "Are you okay? Come on, keep pushing."

Pressing one knee against the mud, I struggled mightily to lift him up, but there was no response. When I relaxed my hold, Maejima's body crumpled once more to the ground. He was like an inflatable toy without any air left in it.

"Maejima…Maejima?"

I called to him again and again and felt his wrist for a pulse. I checked his breathing and his heartbeat. But…

"Oh, Maejima…"

He was dead.

I felt myself start to become rooted in place, consumed by a sense of futility and powerlessness more than fear. I quickly and firmly shook my head and started, however slightly, to get my mind back on track, but at that moment…

Where's Mei?

An intense alarm, swelling up rapidly.

I wonder if she's okay.

I have to go back and look for her, I thought, panicked. But…No, it was pointless.

Mei was…

She'd let everyone on the second floor know that a fire had broken out, but had she managed to get out safely after that? The front door wasn't the only exit. She might have gone out a different door, or through a window…

I'm sure she made it, I told myself desperately.

I'm sure she made it. Otherwise, how much would I curse myself for being unable to stop her back there?

The explosion had given the fire even more strength, and it was starting to spread to the entire lodge. Dawdling around right here wasn't going to be safe much longer. "I'm sorry." Those were my last words to Maejima before I left him there. I was just starting to turn on my heel when I caught sight of…

Something that was hard to believe.

Slowly, from behind the shrubs where the two people on the

balcony had fallen immediately after the explosion, **that person** appeared.

Beneath the smears of blood and dirt and ash, it was impossible to figure out what color their clothes had been originally. Their hair and the exposed skin of their arms and face were the same. It was almost impossible to distinguish their features with only a quick look.

So after grappling and falling from the second floor…**that person** was the one to escape with their life. So Akazawa was… dead? Or had **that person** finished her off?

Though they dragged one leg behind them and the opposite shoulder slumped, their body twisted grotesquely…

That person was shuffling toward me under their own power. Through the rising smoke, lit up red by the flames devouring the lodge, the movement struck me like the shambling of an undead creature.

They were coming straight toward me. There were only a few meters between us. They really were carrying a knife of some sort in their right hand. In the ocher filth on their face, two bugging eyes flashed. An instant later, goose bumps pricked the sweaty skin that covered my body.

I had imagined this countless times when I was reading novels. I'd even watched performances of it in movies…But I had never seen it in the real world. Not once. Nothing like this…

…Crazed eyes. The eyes of a person who had completely lost

their mind.

They were even different from Mr. Kubodera's when he had slit his own throat in the classroom. His eyes had been utterly vacant. At least his eyes hadn't been this terrifying, hadn't held this threatening glint.

Those eyes…

They were looking at me.

As soon as I realized I was being watched, I bolted from the spot with all the speed I was capable of. I truly believed I was going to be attacked and killed.

I ran. I thought I might have heard someone scream once or twice behind me. I guess those were students who weren't so quick to run and got attacked by **that person**. I didn't stop and I didn't turn around to look, though. I was too scared.

I kept running through the front yard until finally I saw the shadow of the front gate ahead of me, and just then—a sharp pain jolted through my chest. Unable to bear it, I brought my feet to a halt. I pressed both hands down on my chest and fell to my knees on the ground.

The pain only flared once, and then I started to feel better right away.

"Couldn't…give me a break…just this once?" I muttered, then tried to stand. I impulsively looked behind me.

That person*—the killer was dragging one leg. I think I put some good distance between us. Maybe they're not coming after me*

anymore. Yeah, it's probably okay now…

However.

That person was still there.

With an appearance that suggested they had just this moment been reborn from the fires of hell.

True, there was a somewhat greater distance between us than before, but they were still coming straight at me at the same pace.

I tried to run, blinded by panic, but my foot caught in a patch of mud. I pitched over with a complete lack of grace and banged my hip hard. Even as I groaned in shock, I tried desperately to stand up again. But I couldn't get any strength behind the effort quickly enough. At long last, I stood myself back up and once again looked behind me. My blood curdled at the steadily closing distance between my enemy and me, and another pang went through my chest.

I can't get away…

For one instant, defeat skimmed through my mind.

I can't get away. Is there nowhere to run? So now it's my turn, out here. Like the caretaker who got murdered in the kitchen. Like Maejima. Like Akazawa.

"Don't come near me."

Feeble words of rebellion that I could only barely vocalize.

"Don't. Not another step…"

That person—the crazed murderer's deformed steps never halted.

Instead, they seemed to speed up. The hand holding the knife swung up. Behind them, the roar of the flames was extraordinarily violent. Smoke billowed up everywhere. When suddenly—

A black shape appeared from the flank.

Before the words *What? Who?* had even formed, the shape leapt viciously at the killer and knocked the knife from their hand. The next moment, the killer was sent somersaulting and planted on their back on the ground. Instantly, the shape was leaning over them.

"Oh!" I gawked. "Mr. Chibiki?!"

By the time I shouted, he was already putting an end to it.

The shape moved away from the killer, who had ceased moving. It stood up and turned to look at me.

"Mr. Chibiki!"

"That was close," the all-in-black librarian murmured in response. "When I got back from the hospital, all this was going on. I was aghast. I made it this far when I saw this person had a knife and was…"

Adjusting his dirty, black-framed glasses, Mr. Chibiki threw his gaze back to the face of the killer.

"I didn't know who it was, but I could tell right away that something wasn't right."

"The caretaker was murdered, in the kitchen."

"The caretaker?"

“Yes. **Mr.** Numata.”

“Then…”

“I think that’s where this started. Then Maejima got stabbed, and the fire started…”

“She did all that?”

Mr. Chibiki cast his eyes down once more to the face of the killer —Mrs. Numata.

“Why would she do such a thing?” he started to wonder, then shook his head emphatically. As if telling himself there was no point in wondering about it. That this was just another of the “disasters” for this year…

“Anyway, you need to get out of here,” Mr. Chibiki ordered, lifting his eyes from her. “You should get outside the gate. Quickly.”

“Er…yes, sir.”

“You go ahead. I’ll take care of her… of Mrs. Numata.”

“Huh?”

“She’s merely unconscious. I can’t just leave her here.”

“But…”

“I’ll be fine. You saw what I just did, didn’t you? Despite how I look on the outside, I know what I’m doing. I’m still active at a martial arts school.”

He must have known judo or kenpo or something like that. This was no time to be impressed, but it was true: It was pretty out of step

with how Mr. Chibiki looked.

"Now go on, hurry."

I paused, blank.

"I said go!"

"…Yes, sir."

9

Among the people who had fled beyond the gate, I located Teshigawara's face first. He was leaning against one of the stone gateposts, staring vacantly as the Sakitani Memorial Hall went up in flames. Kazami was beside the opposite gatepost. He was sitting on the ground with one knee up, both arms wrapped around his leg. He had his forehead pressed against his kneecap, his body rigid.

"Hey…Sakaki."

Teshigawara noticed me and raised a hand limply.

"Where's Maejima?"

I couldn't answer his question.

"…Too late for him, huh?"

Still impossible to answer.

"Mr. Chibiki got back. He ran in to see what's going on."

"…I saw him."

As I replied, my eyes searched for Mei.

"…He saved me."

"He told us to cool it right here. To wait for the ambulance and firefighters to come."

This was such a raging fire. Even from far, far away, people would be able to tell at a glance that something wasn't right. Even if direct communication from the site of the fire wasn't possible, the fire department was probably already moving on it.

"Are these the only people who got away?" Surveying the area, I saw five people around the gate besides me. Mei, at least, was not among them. "Where's Misaki?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, she's not here."

Teshigawara clawed at his dirty brown hair.

"Neither is Mochizuki, huh? It's fine. I'm sure they both ran off somewhere else."

I was totally unable to convince myself to be that optimistic—to surrender all thought like that. Unable to sit still, I turned my back on Teshigawara. I took a few quick steps away from the gate, and stared hard at the flames that continued to burn the night sky…And then—

"Mei Misaki."

Speaking her name in a low, yet forceful voice, directed in some unseen direction, I searched the pockets of my pants. I found my cell phone. It hadn't broken from the impact when I fell over. I pulled up

Mei's number from my call history, then pushed the call button.

Please.

Literally praying, I pressed the phone to my ear.

One time tonight, I knew, this phone had connected with hers. *So do it one more time. Just one more time, right now…*

…Please connect.

Please. Even if it's just for one second.

The short electronic buzz of "attempting connection." It repeated enough times that I should have given up, and then—

The sound changed to a ring. After the fourth ring, someone picked up.

"…Sakakibara?"

There was a lot of interference that made it hard to hear, but I knew: that was Mei's voice.

"Thank goodness…I can't believe I got through."

With my free hand, I covered my mouth and the end of the phone in order to focus my voice and said, "This is Misaki, right? So you're safe."

"What about you? And everyone else?"

"We ran to the gate. But not everybody's here. Maejima's gone, but Mr. Chibiki came back and he saved me, and the murderer was Mrs. Numata and…"

I realized I was blathering on with no real point, and I cut myself

off abruptly.

"Where are you?"

I asked the question foremost on my mind.

"The backyard," Mei answered. "Near something that looks like a storage shed."

She was there? Then…

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she said, her tone listless. Then, after an ambiguous pause, she continued. "But I can't move yet."

"What?"

She was fine, but she couldn't move? I didn't understand what she meant. But before I even tried thinking about it, I said, "I'm coming. I'll be right there, so stay where you are."

But when I said that—

"You shouldn't come here."

That was Mei's response. *Kksshhhksshhk*... Unpleasant static overlaid itself on her voice.

"Why not?"

"You shouldn't come, Sakakibara."

"Come on, why not?"

"I…"

The noise started to get much worse, and her words were getting

cut off. I tightened my hand, pressing the phone against my ear so that I wouldn't miss a thing.

"I…have to stop it."

"Do what?"

Stop it?…She couldn't mean…

A fuzzy image buried deep in my mind swelled up larger just then and took on concrete form. She couldn't mean…

"Misaki, you aren't saying…"

I spoke louder, but through the *Kkshhhkkkshhhk, vmmmvvvmmvmvm* noises growing worse and worse, I don't know how much of what I said got through to her.

"Is anyone with you over there?"

"I'm…"

"Who is it? Misaki?"

"…might regret it, so I…"

…And that was it.

Her voice disappeared, almost like a fade-out. In that brief instant on this midsummer night of such cruel "disasters," the tenuous thread that had almost miraculously connected us snapped. The clock was approaching midnight and we were closing in on August 9.

10

I started running immediately, without a word of explanation to anyone.

The flames that continued to burn through the building serving as my light, I ran full-speed away from the gate, down the path that wound around to the east side of the backyard. Ash created by the fire was dropping on the ground, already damp from the rain, making it extremely difficult to find any purchase. But somehow I managed not to go sprawling even once, and, at last, the storage shed I sought came into view. I don't think it had taken even five minutes.

The heaving of the wind paired with the roar of the mounting flames so nearby. Distinct from those sounds, I became aware of the distant, resonating sirens of fire trucks…

As I ran up to the storage shed, I searched for Mei.

A generous estimate would put the shed at a distance of less than ten meters from the main house, so depending on the direction of the wind, I wouldn't be surprised to see it catch light at some point. But luckily, the building was still intact—it seemed.

"Misaki!" My voice was strangled. "Where are you? Misaki!"

There was no answer. But—

I had circled around to the north side of the shed, continuing to call her name, when finally I spotted her. She—Mei was standing by herself, her back against the wall of the shed.

"There you are…"

Her blouse and skirt, as well as her hair, face, arms, and legs…All were caked in ash. But just as she'd told me over the phone, she didn't seem to have any major wounds…

"Misaki?"

When I called to her, she turned a fraction toward me. But her gaze returned immediately to its original object. And then…

She was looking at something at a distance of four or five meters…It was someone besides her—**another person**.

The person was lying facedown on the ground. Their entire body was covered in even more ash than Mei's. Plus their lower body was buried under several large pieces of heavy lumber. Given that, naturally I couldn't easily tell **who it was**, or even judge their height or gender from where I stood.

"The force of the explosion knocked over the lumber," Mei said, her eyes locked on the person. She didn't have her eye patch over her left eye. "So they can't move anymore…"

"We have to help them."

I said it without a second thought; then my breath caught with a gulp.

Mei was silently shaking her head from side to side.

That was when I noticed she was holding **something** in her hands. It was…a pickax? Her right hand gripped the haft and the red-painted "head" part was resting on the ground. It must have been lying around nearby. Or she'd gone and gotten it out of the shed.

“We can’t do that.” Without ever turning her eyes toward me, Mei went on to declare, “**That’s the ‘extra person.’** So we…”

That idea had gelled while I was running over here—that she might have been with the “extra person” right at that moment. But even so, a strangled cry escaped me. “Wha—?…Really?”

“I can see it…They have ‘the color of death.’”

“Did you…just now see it?”

“…It was a while ago.”

Her voice sounded sad, somehow.

“I knew, but I couldn’t say anything.”

Very, very sad, somehow…

“But…Well, after I heard that tape for myself, I thought: I have to stop it. I never expected such terrible things to happen tonight. I have to put a stop to it. If I don’t stop it now, everyone will…”

Mei lifted her face sharply. She put both hands back on the haft of the pickax.

“Wait—” I jumped out in front of her. My body moved reflexively.

I proceeded then toward the person lying facedown on the ground, who Mei had proclaimed to be the “extra person.” I wanted to see **who it was** for myself.

I’d thought the person was unconscious, but just then they moved dramatically. With a pained moan, they planted both hands on the

ground and lifted their upper body to try and slither out from under the lumber. But, utterly exhausted, the person fell back into the dirt.

I walked up to them. I went right up beside them and bent over, holding my breath as I looked into their face.

Their eyes, vacantly wide, met mine by chance.

"Uh…"

Her lips trembled.

"…Koichi."

"N…" I barely avoided howling. "No…"

…It couldn't be.

Was this some kind of joke?

I blinked repeatedly, and looked back at the person's face. But it was still, without question, **her**.

"You mean this is the 'extra person'?" I staggered back to an upright position and turned to look at Mei. "Her? Really?"

Mei nodded mutely, then lowered her eyes.

"No…Not her. How could that even…"

Vvvmmmmm…A familiar, low-pitched sound was coming from somewhere.

It started rumbling, as if trying to grind down my heart—my thoughts and my memories. The rumble that, once noticed, became unspeakably menacing and unnatural. During intervals in its hum…

How many times have I visited this town now?

This was my—Koichi Sakakibara's—soliloquy, delivered at the start of it all, when I moved here in April from Tokyo.

Maybe three or four times in elementary school. Was this the first time since starting middle school?…Or maybe not.

Or maybe not…?

By the way, Koichi.

On some phone call or other with my father, currently in India.

How does Yomiyama seem, a year and a half later? Not much different?

Yomiyama, **a year and a half later**…?

Why? Why?

And that was the myna bird my grandparents kept as a pet.

Cheer…Cheer. Up.

The enthusiastic, shrill voice of that bird.

They named it "Ray."

Ray? Yes, of course. The bird's name is Ray.

It was—and this gets another "probably" attached—two years old. They'd bought it on an impulse at a pet shop two years ago, in the fall.

Two years ago, in the fall…In other words, **a year and a half ago**. When I was a first-year in middle school.

*Was this the first time since starting middle school?…**Or maybe not.***

…Yomiyama, **a year and a half later**.

A year and a half ago, I'd…

When someone dies, there's a funeral.

I don't…I don't want to go to any more funerals.

That had been my grandfather, who was turning senile.

Poor, poor Ritsuko. It's so sad, Ritsuko and Reiko both…

Ritsuko **and Reiko both**…

"…Oh," I muttered, almost entirely vapor-locked. "So that's what it was."

Vvvmmmmm…The continuous rumbling of that creepy, low-pitched sound that threatened to deaden all thought was pressing down relentlessly on a corner of my brain.

Do teachers die, too?

I remembered a conversation with Mr. Chibiki, I don't remember when it was.

If they're the head teacher or the assistant teacher, yes. Because they're members of third-year Class 3.

If someone is a member of the class—of third-year Class 3—they might die in the "disasters." In which case—of course—they could also come back as the "extra person"…

But…

“Come on, really?”

Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from checking one more time with Mei. It was not, after all, something I could believe right away just because she told me to.

“Is she…Ms. Mikami—I mean, is Reiko really the ‘extra person’?”

11

“At school, I’m ‘Ms. Mikami,’ got it? Try to remember that.”

The night before my first day at the new middle school, Reiko had told me the “North Yomi fundamentals”…

“The First” and “the Second” had been half-joking school superstitions; and “the Third,” which said to “obey at all costs whatever the class decides,” had been, I realized now, her hinting at a crucial rule that tied into the issue of the “extra person.” But at least at that point, **the preparation that had had the greatest meaning for me was, of course, “the Fourth.”**

“You must strictly respect the distinction between public and private life. Try not to call me ‘Reiko’ at school, even by mistake.”

Of course, I’d assented obediently.

My mother, Ritsuko Sakakibara (née Mikami), had died fifteen years ago. Her little sister, eleven years younger than her, was my

aunt by blood, Reiko Mikami. The fact that Reiko was a teacher at the school I would be transferring to—plus that she was the assistant head teacher of my class—was, in a certain sense, an extremely reassuring coincidence. However, it would also be a relationship that could easily be a source of stupid misunderstandings and trouble if I wasn't sufficiently careful. I freely accepted that, so…

So I had faithfully respected her instructions, which she had deliberately highlighted to me as "the Fourth of the North Yomi fundamentals." I had called her "Ms. Mikami" at school and "Reiko" at home, treating her as if she were two entirely separate people.

Reiko had done the same. At school, she never called me "Koichi" and never forgot to treat me as "Sakakibara, the transfer student"…So there had been plenty of times when we had both behaved with more reservation to each other than strictly necessary.

Naturally Mr. Kubodera knew the truth from the very beginning, and so did most of the class. That was why, for instance, when discussing the new "tactic" for June and deciding to treat both Mei and me as if we were "not there," Mr. Kubodera had addressed the class with these words:

We must all respect the decision of the class. Even Ms. Mikami, who is in a very difficult position, told us earlier that she would do "whatever possible."

Ms. Mikami's "difficult position." Obviously, that was the position of having to ignore her nephew at school as if he were "not there," even though he shared the same house as her after school.

And a little before that, Yuya Mochizuki had come to our house in Koike and was loitering around outside.

I was just, uh, worried.

My house is near here, in this town, so I thought I might, uh…

Mochizuki had explained himself in that halting, hesitant way when I'd unexpectedly appeared, but I wasn't the object of his worry, even though I'd missed school that day to go to the hospital. I knew for certain that his primary goal had been to check on Ms. Mikami/Reiko, who had been out of school for several days around the same time.

After graduating from an art school in Tokyo, she'd come back home to Yomiyama and gotten a job teaching art at the middle school she'd attended. She dubbed the side house her "office/bedroom" and used it as her studio on the side, focusing intently on the creation of paintings that she called "my real job"…

I had for these last four months—not even—been groping my way toward just the right degree of distance from/involvement with her.

After Yukari Sakuragi's death, Mei had stopped coming to school for several days in a row…And I had wanted to find out how she was doing. Even then, I'd had a simple "means of finding out" by asking Reiko to show me the class list.

Nevertheless, I didn't **pull it**. I didn't tell her that I wanted a class list for myself and I never attempted to ask her outright about the discomfort I felt at school and all the questions I had…And that, too, was due to my hesitation and nervousness that resulted from

struggling to maintain a sense of distance from her, I think.

I'll worry about me, and I can tell you I've got some pretty touchy emotional issues going on.

I knew I'd told Mochizuki something like that, and yet…

"Sakakibara."

Ms. Mikami—Reiko—trapped under the lumber and unable to move, and Mei, lifting the heavy pickax in both hands. For a long moment, standing between the two of them, I could think of nothing to say. I just stood there.

Then Mei spoke to me, her voice forceful.

"Think it over, Sakakibara. Think carefully. **Does any other class at our school have an assistant head teacher?**"

"Huh? Well…I mean…"

"They don't," Mei declared flatly. "For some reason, no one ever thought about it. We just accepted it. I did the same thing at first. But don't you think that's odd? Third-year Class 3 is the only one in the whole school that has an assistant head teacher."

I couldn't say a word.

"I think Ms. Mikami must have died the year before last, the year she was the head teacher for Class 3. After the second semester started and that boy Sakuma abandoned his role and stopped being 'not there,' and the 'disasters' started. The real reason the art club was on hiatus until this spring has to be because Ms. Mikami was the sponsor for it, and then she died."

Meaning that the reason it had been resumed in April was that Reiko, reawakened as the "extra person," had filled the role of sponsor. That the actual events had been expunged from everybody's memory as well as all the records, which had been corrupted into false memories and records?

I searched intently through the recesses of my own heart.

And yet, however, restoring the memories doctored/corrupted in this "phenomenon" **from the inside** was probably impossible as long as I was part of this world. That's how it seemed. The only thing possible was to extrapolate from a handful of objective facts I'd managed to collect, to a truth that had to be…

Maybe…this wasn't the first time I'd come to Yomiyama since starting middle school. Hadn't I come here once, one and a half years ago, the autumn of my first year in middle school?

If that had been…a visit to attend the wake and memorial service when Reiko died the autumn before last…

I don't...I don't want to go to any more funerals.

The meaning behind my grandfather's wail thudded home.

Poor, poor Ritsuko. It's so sad, Ritsuko and Reiko both…

His sorrow at outliving his oldest daughter, Ritsuko, fifteen years ago. The sorrow of outliving his second daughter, Reiko, as well two years ago had, in his memories muddled by senility, mingled with the sorrow of fifteen years ago and made him say those things…

In order to relieve the shock and grief and loneliness Reiko's sudden death had brought with it the autumn before last, my

grandparents had impulsively purchased a myna bird they discovered in a pet shop. And then they had named the bird after their deceased daughter, shortening the name to "Ray."

Before long, Ray had one human word that she could speak —"Why?"

That could have been a question my heartbroken grandfather or grandmother asked their deceased daughter when they sat in the room by the veranda each day, facing the family altar. Something like "Why? Why did you die, Reiko? Why?" Maybe Ray had learned from that and started to say "Why?" all the time.

Cheer…Cheer up.

That probably came about the same way. Perhaps they had been the words of encouragement my grandmother spoke day after day to my grandfather, who was sunken in continual despair, his heartbreak never lessening. And then Ray had learned it and…

Cheer…Cheer up.

"There were enough desks in the classroom, even though the 'disasters' for this year actually started in April…And this explains why, no?" Mei pointed out, lowering the pickax momentarily to her feet. "They really were one desk short at the start of the semester. But not in the classroom—it was in the teachers' office."

"Yeah…"

"Wh-what are you two saying?"

Just then, I heard Ms. Mikami's—Reiko's—perplexed voice.

“You don’t believe that! Koichi, I’m not…”

Propped up on both of her elbows, craning her chin up, Reiko was looking up at me. Her face, black and smudged with ash and mud—that face that held a shadow of my mother in it—was shockingly twisted. Probably from the combination of physical pain and psychological shock.

“Sakakibara,” Mei said, once more lifting the pickax in both hands and taking a step closer to me. “Move.”

“Misaki…”

I took the full brunt of the iron conviction on her face, then found myself caught and held by the spark in Reiko’s confused, terrified eyes as she lay on the ground behind me. And then…

“No,” I said, taking the pickax from Mei’s hands.

It was medium-sized, its haft sixty or seventy centimeters long, but when I held it, it pulled against my arm. Both **ends** on the iron “head” were pointed and sharper than I would have thought. With this weight and sharpness, it wouldn’t be hard at all to inflict deadly wounds on a person.

“No. You can’t do this.”

“But Sakakibara…If we don’t…”

“I know.” I nodded, feeling the full weight of my decision. “I know. I’ll do it.”

I heard Reiko’s terse scream. I slowly turned back around to face her and adjusted my hold on the pickax I’d taken from Mei.

“K-Koichi—Wait, what are you…”

The look on her face screamed *No!* and she shook her head in small, tight tremors.

“Returning ‘the casualty’ to Death…”

I was fighting back pain and the wild rush of my heartbeat as I spoke.

“That’s the only way to stop the ‘disasters’ once they’ve begun. Your old classmate Matsunaga from fifteen years ago told us that.”

“What are you talking about? You can’t…Stop acting so crazy. Stop this instant!”

“I’m sorry, Reiko.”

Planting my feet, I gathered all the strength I had in my body and lifted the pickax over my head. *It’s the only way. It’s the only way.* Repeating that to myself over and over.

And then…

Aiming the pickax for the spot on her back where Reiko’s heart would be as she lay facedown on the ground, in the instant before I started to swing the pickax down—

Is this right?

Is what I’m doing right?

Is this truly right? We’re not wrong about this, are we?

There was only one piece of evidence that said Reiko was this year’s “extra person.” A judgment made with Mei’s special ability—

her "doll's eye" that could see the "color of death"—that was all the overt evidence we had. The rest was nothing more than a guess based on a series of circumstantial events. It wasn't as if I had a strong conviction about it and could deny the memories I had of Reiko. And yet…

Is this right?

To believe her and return Reiko to Death?

Is this really right? We're not wrong, are we?

What if Mei had misunderstood everything? What if being able to see the "color of death" was really just something she'd talked herself into believing, nothing more than a delusion?

That would mean I was killing Reiko, by my own hand, even though she wasn't "the casualty." The person on whom I couldn't help overlaying the image of my mother, Ritsuko, whom I knew only from photographs. The person I couldn't help seeking out. The person who held probably one of the most important roles in my life. The person whom I wasn't really "bad at dealing with," but instead had probably loved ever since I was a child.

I mean, in broad strokes, the "reality" here in Yomiyama was that a phenomenon was occurring that doctored/corrupted and modified people's memories and records, those memories growing indistinct and vanishing over time…And it happened all the time. In the middle of all that, was I supposed to uncritically accept something that Mei Misaki alone could see, something she swore was the "truth"? Was it right to do what I was about to do, because she said so?

My doubts, anxiety, and confusion swirled together. I became unable to move, as if literally petrified.

Just then, a monstrous roar came from the main building, where the fire continued to burn. The frame of the building had burned through and the roof had finally collapsed. A huge billow of sparks flew into the air accompanied by a swirl of thick smoke. Some of them even fluttered down around me, where I stood frozen. If the fire went on like this, we would be in danger here, too, at some point.

So…

I couldn't vacillate over this forever.

Is this right?

Is this really right?

Still questioning myself, I turned back to look at Mei.

She hadn't budged in the slightest from the place she'd stood this whole time, and she was looking straight at me. Her right eye, narrowed coolly, and the "doll's eye," the "blue eye, empty to all"—neither of them held the slightest doubt or hesitation. Only…Yes, they were filled only with a terrible sadness.

Her lips moved very slightly.

I couldn't hear what she said, but I could read the words from the movement of her lips. "Trust me," they said.

…I…

I closed my eyes tightly and took a deep breath.

I…

I opened my eyes, then turned back to Reiko. Violently conflicted, whipped by hesitation, fear, and despair, still I saw in her face the shadow of the mother I knew only from photographs. But…

I'm…going to believe Mei.

I'm going to believe her.

Gritting my teeth, I made my decision.

I'll believe Mei.

Maybe I don't mean "I'm going to believe her" as much as "I want to believe her." But that's good enough. I'm okay with that.

Cutting through my indecision, I swung the pickax overhead. Even Reiko's scream of "Stop!" (Reiko…) didn't penetrate my brain (Good-bye…Reiko…).

Filling the movement with all the strength I possessed, I swung the **point** of the pickax down into her back (Good-bye…Mother…), slicing through the flesh to reach her heart…

As if that single impact had rebounded into my own body, a pain more intense than any I had experienced before cut through my flimsy chest. The image that flashed instantly to mind was the X-ray of my shriveled and distorted lung after the third collapse.

I pulled my hands away from the pickax lodged in Reiko's back and pressed them against my chest, crumpling to the ground where I stood. Panting at the ferocious shortness of breath as my consciousness grew ever fainter, I felt the heat of tears spilling from

my eyes in ceaseless streams. Obviously the pain and shortness of breath were not their only cause.

Outroduction

Let me give a rundown on the facts that came to light in the following days.

Before dawn on August 9, 1998, the efforts of the firefighters who rushed to the scene were for naught, and the Sakitani Memorial Hall was almost entirely destroyed. They found a total of six bodies at the scene.

The confirmed identities and locations are as follows:

- Kensaku Numata	…	Caretaker. Interior (kitchen).
- Manabu Maejima	…	Student. Front yard.
- Izumi Akazawa	…	Student. Front yard.
- Shigeki Yonemura	…	Student. Front yard.
- Takako Sugiura	…	Student. Interior, east. High probability she was in room 212 (shared with Akazawa).
- Junta Nakao	…	Student. Interior, east. Possibly in second-floor hallway.

The results of the coroner's inquest and court-ordered autopsies revealed that not a single one of them had died as a result of the fire.

The caretaker Mr. Numata had been stabbed in the neck by a large number of metal cooking skewers, which had been the cause of his death, and thereafter had been burned in the fire. Of the other five,

who were all students, four of them—Maejima, Yonemura, Sugiura, and Nakao—had died from blood loss due to being stabbed and cut in multiple locations by a sharp blade. Akazawa appeared to have died due to snapping her spine in her fall from the second-floor balcony.

With the various circumstances and witness testimony, the fact that Mieko, the wife of Kensaku Numata, who had shared the role of managing the Sakitani Memorial Hall, had brought about the deaths of these six people was found to be conclusive. It was thought that Mieko had also tossed kerosene around the kitchen to set the fire after murdering Mr. Numata. Mr. Chibiki had restrained her, but, before being surrendered to the police, she had died. She had bitten through her tongue in an effort to commit suicide, and had apparently succeeded.

Why had Mieko Numata perpetrated such a string of crimes that night? Regardless of whether she possessed an exceptionally aberrant psychology, the root cause was still unclear.

* * *

Wakui, who'd suffered an asthma attack during dinner on August 8, emerged unscathed due to treatment received at the hospital to which Mr. Chibiki had delivered him. As to why he should have neglected to check how much medicine was in his inhaler, he supposedly admitted that it perplexed him, too.

Kazami, who had met with such unexpected misery due to an outrageous misunderstanding by his childhood friend, had suffered no substantial injury beyond a sprained ankle. Even after testing, no

abnormalities were found in his head, which had suffered a not-insignificant loss of blood from the impact of his fall, and he came through without major incident. I haven't heard yet how he and Teshigawara talked things over after that. But, well—given their personalities, I don't think it turned into any major conflict.

* * *

The cause of the intense pain that I, Koichi Sakakibara, experienced was, as suspected, due to a spontaneous pneumothorax in my left lung, which then went on to suffer a collapse somewhat more severe than my previous two experiences. I didn't entirely lose consciousness at the scene, but the pain and shortness of breath that I continued to feel until I was treated at the hospital were not minor…So, to be honest, I have little memory of the events around that time, such as what happened after my lung collapsed or how I was rescued.

In any case…

By the time my symptoms eased to a certain degree and I had calmed enough to be able to think things over, I was in a room in the same ward of that old, familiar municipal hospital in Yumigaoka where I had received treatment only a few months earlier.

My grandmother had come running to my side, and after talks with the head physician, the suggestion was made that I consider simply having surgery at this point. The overall determination was that surgery would be a better option in order to prevent any further recurrences. And so my father in India, ignorant of all that had occurred, was speedily contacted and his permission obtained, and

two days later I underwent the surgery.

Unlike before, the trend was now toward thoracoscopic surgery for this sort of lung surgery. They would make a few incisions in my body about one centimeter in length, then insert an endoscope and other instruments through these to complete the necessary procedures from outside my body. The burden on the patient from this method was far smaller than that from open-chest surgery, and the postoperative recovery was faster as well.

The result was a successful surgery with no complications. My recovery was also a quick one, and I was informed that the prognosis was that I could be discharged after only one more week.

* * *

Mei came with Mochizuki to visit me only three days before my release, on August 15th. I'm sure they weren't aware of it, but it was the day when, many years ago, our country had seen the end of a war.

"…Even so."

Mochizuki was the one who'd spoken.

"I wonder what made Mrs. Numata do such crazy stuff all of a sudden. She didn't look like she was about to do anything like that at dinner."

And so the events of that night had spontaneously become the focus of the conversation. As soon as he'd learned about the fire that night, Mochizuki had escaped out the emergency exit on the western wing of the building. He had then fled to the area near the gate,

apparently just missing me as I was heading for Mei's location.

"There's no way to know, since she died. That's what the police said."

The day before yesterday, I'd received a visit from Detective Oba of the Yomiyama Police Department. That was also when I'd learned the details of the incident.

"I heard she bit her tongue off," Mochizuki said, his eyebrows knitting in disgust. "That's a pretty tough way to kill yourself."

"Sometimes people bite their tongues off, and the piece gets stuck in their windpipe, so they suffocate. That's probably what happened to Mrs. Numata."

"Hm-m-m."

"So we wound up with seven 'deaths for August.'"

I heard Mei's blank statement and cocked my head. "Seven? Are you counting the Numatas?"

"Mr. Chibiki looked into it more, and he found out the Numatas were Takabayashi's grandparents. On his mom's side."

"What? You mean…"

Ikuo Takabayashi, who had died of a heart attack in June.

"Since they were his grandparents, that means they were blood relatives within two degrees. So they were actually linked to the class and **in range**. Incidentally, the Numatas became the caretakers there around ten years ago. So someone else was working there for the trip fifteen years ago."

Feeling thoroughly defeated for some reason, I sighed. I gently rubbed my ribs through my pajamas, where the incision from the surgery still was.

"Of course, that's all purely a coincidence," Mei said, sighing as I had done. "It would be wrong to think any kind of unseen will had intervened there."

"Did Mr. Chibiki say that?"

"He probably would, huh?"

"…Even so," Mochizuki said again. "I sure am glad you're getting better, Sakakibara. When I heard you were having surgery, I was really worried about you."

"The surgery was really simple," I replied with as blasé an expression as I could muster, but I could see the tears pooling in Mochizuki's eyes.

"But come on, considering the 'disasters' for this year, you could imagine the surgery being botched or all kinds of terrible things."

"You've got a soft heart, boy. But it's fine. The 'disasters' are over."

"They are?"

Mochizuki looked from my face to Mei's, suspicion plain on his own.

"Misaki says that, too…But still."

"I think the 'extra person' must have died in the fire that night."

“Misaki said that, too. I wonder if it’s true.”

Mochizuki blinked his watering eyes and folded his arms over his chest, frowning.

“It was one of the five students who died that night? But no, because according to what Matsunaga said on that tape, once the ‘extra person’ dies, they instantly cease to exist. Hm-m-m…”

“It means that the ‘extra person’ existed until that night, but we can’t remember who it was anymore,” I told him, struggling to keep the morose feelings at bay. Then I changed my tone slightly and asked him, “How many people went on that trip?”

“Um…Fourteen people. Fifteen, if you include Mr. Chibiki.”

“There must have been sixteen people originally. It’s just that no one remembers that anymore.”

No one…No one except Mei and me, who had been so deeply involved in **her** “death.”

Not Mochizuki, not Teshigawara, not Mr. Chibiki…No one remembered her anymore. No one remembered that an art teacher named Reiko Mikami had existed since April, the assistant head teacher of third-year Class 3. Or that she had become the “substitute head teacher” after Mr. Kubodera’s death, had half-remembered her own experience fifteen years ago and planned the camping trip—which must have seemed to her like a desperate measure to take—and had been there that night as the chaperone.

It was on a phone call with Mei that I learned **that**. The day before my surgery, with some effort I escaped my hospital room and

called her house on the ward's green phone. I had my cell phone with me in my room, but it was out of battery and I couldn't use it anymore.

"Nobody remembers Ms. Mikami," she had told me without even asking how I was doing, coming onto the phone after Kirika had handed it to her, as usual. "They keep saying she died two years ago in the fall."

"Two years ago…"

"Yeah. That kid Sakuma abandoned his role of being 'not there' right after summer break, and as soon as October started, one of the students died…followed by Ms. Mikami. They said she drowned in Yomiyama River. You still don't remember?"

"She drowned…?"

"There was a lot of rain at the end of October, and the river was swollen. The next day, they found her body downstream. They don't know if she jumped or got swept away by accident…"

I couldn't speak.

"I can't remember yet, either, but **that's what really happened**. Someone linked to the class who died in the 'disasters' two years ago. So it was actually eight people, not seven. And everyone's memories went back to normal. Lots of records and data did, too. Probably all of it. I looked at the class list, and the part where it said 'Assistant Head Teacher: Reiko Mikami' is gone, too."

"So then she really was…"

That would be the best proof that Reiko had been the "extra

person."

"People are saying that after Mr. Kubodera died, Mr. Chibiki filled in as the substitute head teacher. It was an exception, and he was still serving as the librarian of the secondary library. They also say that Mr. Chibiki was the one who planned and led the trip…Just him."

"What about the art club?"

The thought occurred to me suddenly, so I asked.

"I wonder what's going on with the art club now, after it got revived in April."

"It's true that after Ms. Mikami died, the teacher who was supervising it with her transferred the next year. The new art teacher who came in said they didn't want to run the art club, so it went on hiatus. But now they're saying that teacher agreed to do it this spring."

"Oh."

I had guessed a lot of things about Reiko's existence from talking with my grandmother when she came running to the hospital. She never questioned the safety of her daughter, who had participated in the trip as its chaperone, and had only dabbed at her eyes and said, "Oh, if only Reiko were alive right now."

She even told me, "You know how she was. She thought of you as her own child, Koichi.

"She would say that if Yosuke had been a cruel father to you, she would have taken you in and raised you. Even though she only saw

you every once in a while when you were small."

I wondered what it was like now inside the side house Reiko had used as her office/bedroom.

For at least the brief window of four months, she had continued her life in this town, in that house, as a "casualty made flesh." Some trace of it must have…But no, even that would have disappeared. Or taken on some other identity with some other meaning.

"Obon is almost over, but when you get out of the hospital, would you like to visit Reiko's grave?"

When she said that, it was all I could do not to turn my face away from my grandmother's well-intentioned gaze.

"I know it would make her happy if you came with me."

…

…

…

I thought it would be all right if I talked to Mochizuki and Teshigawara, and even to Mr. Chibiki, about **what had really happened**. Although I got the feeling that, aside from Mr. Chibiki, no matter how much I explained it to them, it wouldn't feel real to them and they'd just be confused.

* * *

I don't know if Mochizuki was trying to be considerate, but eventually he went home, leaving Mei with me. As he was departing, he murmured, "Oh, right," and pulled something out of his bag.

“I meant to give this to you. I’ll make a copy for you, too, Misaki.”

What Mochizuki then handed me was the “commemorative photo” we’d taken in front of the gate when we’d arrived at the Sakitani Memorial Hall the evening of August 8.

“So, Misaki—how long did you know?”

I waited until Mochizuki left before I asked Mei the question that I’d been wanting to ask the whole time I’d been hospitalized.

“That Ms. Mikami…Reiko was the ‘extra person’? When did you…?”

“When was it?” Mei put a hand to her forehead in a deliberate gesture. “…I forget.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I piled on another question, my face earnest.

“I thought it wouldn’t help anything even if I did tell you. Until I heard what was on that tape. Plus…” Shifting the hand on her forehead to the eye patch over her left eye, Mei continued, “I just couldn’t tell you. How could I have? Ms. Mikami looked so much like your mother, who was already gone. When I saw the yearbook and when you showed me all those pictures at your house…I thought, *They’re exactly alike.* She was important to you, right? Ms. Mikami—Reiko.”

“Yeah…But…”

“But what?…You found that tape and I found out that there was still a way to stop the ‘disasters,’ so…that’s why.”

That's why…Yes, she had truly wrestled with it.

If we returned "the casualty" to Death, the "disasters" would stop. Who was that "extra person"? **She could already see who it was.** So then what should she do? What did she need to do?

In order to solidify her own resolve, she'd wanted to hear what was on Katsumi Matsunaga's tape for herself and confirm what he'd said. And before she did that, she'd looked at the group photo of third-year Class 3 from twenty-six years ago with her own eyes and confirmed that Misaki Yomiyama had the "color of death" in that picture. This was how she had worked through things on her own and made the decision alone, and tried to put an end to everything by herself…

"Before, when I called you from the hospital," I said, changing the subject slightly, "I tried calling your cell phone first, but I couldn't get through."

"Yeah. After the trip, I threw it into the river."

Mei said it so casually.

"I told Kirika…told my mom that I lost it in the fire."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because although I do think it's convenient, it's still an awful machine. There's no reason people need to be that connected to each other all the time."

Smiling faintly as she answered, Mei Misaki fit exactly the impression I'd formed of her that day at the end of April when I'd first run into her by the elevators in the inpatient ward.

"Still, she'll probably force me to get a new one soon."

"When she does, can I call you sometimes?"

"Only if it's sometimes," Mei replied, smiling faintly again.

Want to go visit some art museums in Tokyo together one of these days? I tried to say the words, but I swallowed them again.

One of these days…How far in the future would that be from this moment? I no longer felt a vague apprehension about that, like I had before.

One of these days…I knew I would see Mei someday. That's what I thought. Even after I left this town the following spring, I knew it. Even if we didn't make a promise right then and there. Even if the **connection** I felt right then got broken somehow. One of these days, I knew we would meet again.

* * *

After that, we looked together at the photos Mochizuki had given me.

There were two of them. The first was the one Mochizuki had taken. The other was the one Teshigawara had taken. In the bottom right corner of the shot were numbers, showing the date the pictures were taken.

In both, there were five people in the picture.

The gatepost of the Sakitani Memorial Hall was in the center, and one photo showed, in order from right to left, me, Mei, Kazami, Teshigawara, and Ms. Mikami—Reiko. The other one showed

Mochizuki in place of Teshigawara and, per Teshigawara's instructions, he was right up against his "beloved Ms. Mikami"…

"Reiko shows up."

Still staring at the photos, I said it aloud to confirm the fact with Mei.

"I guess Mochizuki couldn't see her."

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Any **color**?" I asked. "How does Reiko look?"

In response, Mei removed the eye patch from her left eye and took another look at the photo. Then, quietly, she answered, "It's the 'color of death.'"

"…Oh."

I slid out of bed and got to my feet to open the window of my room a little. Outside it was bright and sunny, but for some reason the breeze that blew in felt surprisingly chilly.

"I wonder if we're going to start forgetting soon, too," I said, turning to look at Mei. "Of course we'll forget what happened that night on the trip. But we'll start to forget everything else that involves Reiko Mikami that happened between April and that night, too. Like Mochizuki and the rest of them."

…Even the fact that I had, with my own hands, returned her to Death.

"And even if we do like Matsunaga did fifteen years ago and leave behind a recording of the facts we remember or write them down

somewhere, the most important parts will probably disappear, like they did on that tape."

"Maybe, yeah."

Returning her eye patch to its place, Mei gave a small, mute nod. Then she asked me a question.

"Do you want to remember it that badly? You never want to forget?"

"…I don't know."

Forgetting would be better. I felt that way, too. Even now, a pain, distinct from the issues with my lung, lingered deep in my chest. If it meant that pain would disappear completely…Maybe. But still…

I turned slowly back to the window. I still had the two photos in my hands. Dropping my gaze to the photos just once…I went into a reverie.

I didn't know if it would happen in a few days, a few months, or even after a few years. But if all the information about the "extra person" from this year disappeared from my memories someday…

That day…

What would I see in the blank spot that would arise in these photos? What would I feel about it?

Another breeze blew in through the window, ruffling my hair. It really was unexpectedly chilly.

The final gust of the midsummer breeze. With that phrase flowing through my mind, the summer when I was fifteen was coming to an

end.

The End

Afterword to the Paperback Edition

I think it was the beginning of 2006 when I first began refining the concept behind *Another* in earnest.

I received a gracious request from the editorial department at Kadokawa Shoten for a full-length horror novel to follow up *The Last Memory*, which was published in 2002. As a result, the decision was made to begin a serial publication in Kadokawa's *Yasei Jidai* digest that year, when the time was right. I'd casually decided to try my hand at a school-based horror story that turned on a **certain motif** I'd been cooking up for a while at that point—but that was all I'd done. I didn't know where I would go from there. This was the situation when, on a certain day in the latter part of March, my editors—I had two at the time—both came all the way to Kyoto to crack the whip. On this same day, **a certain core idea** had struck me out of the blue while I was in the shower before setting out to meet them. It felt meaty enough that I thought, *I can work with this.* The place where I discussed my idea with the two editors—I remember, it was an atmospheric restaurant called "Shishigatani Sanso"—has since closed. Memories.

At the time, my interest in what are called ball-jointed dolls had risen again. When I went to Tokyo, I had visited a doll gallery in Shibuya called "Maria Cuore" and come face-to-face, alone, with the dolls of Katan Amano and Koitsukihime. It was roughly the same time that I happened to discover the anime and comic series *Rozen Maiden* and started listening to ALI PROJECT.

And onto the evolving "site" of my brain, getting all these things into some sort of order, came the movies *Joshua*, *The Others*, and *Final Destination*; the novel *The Sixth Sayoko* by Riku Onda; and many other works gathering together all kinds of images that I just loved. The story that would bring to life the motif and the idea I'd started out with came together all on its own—so it seemed to me.

It wound up being serialized in *Yasei Jidai* from the July 2006 issue through the May 2009 issue, with several skipped installments in between. It was around three years from the time I began writing until it was complete. Despite many hardships, looking back, I more or less treasure the time I spent with my young friends in the imaginary town of Yomiyama.

To be honest, the magnitude of the reaction following publication of the book in October 2009 surprised me a little.

There were strangely enthusiastic cheers from readers of the classical mysteries I had mainly done before, but also jubilation from new young readers, as well…And alongside my surprise, I also felt quite encouraged by that.

The developments that followed were thoroughly unexpected, as well. A manga, an anime TV series, a live-action movie…Such a variety of plans being put into motion in such a short time was the result of all of you, engaged in all kinds of media, being excitedly drawn into the story of *Another*.

Given that context, this story that I wrote twenty-two years after my debut holds a very special place in my heart. I still indulge in the

conceit that it's my "new magnum opus." And now, on the occasion of this slightly-earlier-than-normal publication in a paperback edition, I think it would be so much fun if it allows even more people to get drawn into the story, too.

Over the course of bringing *Another* from the planning stages through to today, I owe thanks first of all to Ms. Akiko Kaneko, at my great publisher, Kadokawa Shoten. Thanks also to Ms. Shihc Enda, who provided the cover design, as well as on the first book, and to the bookbinder Ms. Kumi Suzuki. Thanks to Mr. Sei Hatsunc for providing his analysis at the end of this volume, despite his busy schedule. And—yes—a huge thanks also to "Maria Cuore," which closed its doors much to my regret this fall, and to the many people I met within its walls.

To be honest, I have several concepts scurrying around in my brain for another story set in Yomiyama, or a side-story sort of thing featuring Koichi and Mei, or for a sequel following the next phase of the "Yomiyama phenomenon." I'm not sure at all yet whether those ideas will ever be realized; but, well, I suppose that, too, is up to what you, the audience, wants to see.

In any case…

I hope you enjoy *Another*, to start off with.

Analysis

Sei Hatsuno

It is difficult for novelists to critique novels objectively—and a towering novelist who continues to lead the pack in the mystery genre even more so. Or, should I say, it's beyond me. So when I took on the job of writing the analysis for this book, I honestly felt intimidated. But I resolved to pick up my pen with the idea that perhaps I might be able to convey something in my role as a part-time novelist who wears the mask of a businessman by day. Half of me works a desk job and is a reader of these books, and so I write of Mr. Ayatsuji not as a colleague, but as a mentor.

In searching for a visual metaphor of Mr. Ayatsuji's novels, I think first of all of optical illusions.

Famous examples of what I mean include the "Young Girl/Old Woman" and the "Rabbit/Duck." But there are some pictures, the mysterious ones, in which people above a certain age see one thing, and the young see another. Take the picture "Message d'Amour des Dauphins" by the Swiss artist Sandro Del Prete. When I visited the R&D center for a certain home electronics manufacturer as part of my work, someone engaged in research into illumination and the brain told me about it.

The subject of the painting is a corked bottle. If you show the picture to a young child not yet in adolescence, all the child will see in the bottle is nine dolphins. But people past adolescence won't see the dolphins no matter how hard they look. What they see instead is

an image of a naked man and woman in a sensual embrace, which doesn't occur to the young child. For those interested, I offer the URL of the artist's home page: http://www.sandrodelprete.com/index.php/home/

I believe that Mr. Ayatsuji's novel has a similar form. In the metaphor of the optical illusion, readers turn the picture on its head and try looking at it from different angles hoping to discover a different way of interpreting the image. But because they lack the information necessary to see it as a different image, or because they haven't picked up on it, they are unable to recognize the hidden picture. Artful foreshadowing allows readers to get as far as an uneasy feeling, but they crane their necks again and again doubtfully. Then in the closing scenes where the conclusive information is provided, everything ties together and a different picture emerges that they never could have imagined from the picture they saw at first.

I need to go back over ten years to say when I first experienced such a "he got me" moment. It was when I read Mr. Ayatsuji's debut story, *Murder in the Decagon Hall*, whose influence still lingers in Japanese mystery fiction. It's no exaggeration to say that I still vividly remember the shock it gave me, greater even than Ellery Queen's book *Drury Lane's Last Case*. I fell into a panic at **that part**. It's true. I was shown a completely different picture and, for one second, I couldn't comprehend what had happened. Those who have read it will sympathize, I'm sure. In my experience of reading many books, I believe that the sensation of losing your cool and sighing in ecstasy after finishing a story, and the hunger that comes

after, are privileges that only a well-made classical mystery can give.

Another is a school-based horror and classical mystery novel with a right to be called Mr. Ayatsuji's new masterpiece. I'll discuss the story itself soon, but an editor at Kadokawa Shoten told me that a wide-scale media expansion is planned for 2012, including an anime TV series and a live-action film. This is welcome news for longtime Ayatsuji fans. At last, his time has come. Go ahead and do a little dance. The ranks of people intrigued by this author, and the number of people in the younger generation who will consider reading this story, will increase. What's so great about that, you ask? I read this in a magazine article long ago: There was once a person who had the following words for someone who had never listened to the Beatles. "I'm jealous of you. You get to have the amazing experience of hearing the Beatles and being moved for the first time." Those are words I could say to a person who might become interested in Mr. Ayatsuji's works through the anime or movie. "I'm jealous of you. You get to have the experience of reading Yukito Ayatsuji's novels for the first time and having your jaw drop." In being taken up by the next generation of readers, from one fan to another, the role this book has to play is a great one.

I really am jealous of the people who will read Mr. Ayatsuji's many novels for the first time because of this book. What unifies his work is a commitment to the unpredictable conclusion. There's the newest entry in the nine-volume "Hall" series, *Murder in the Hall of Unearthly Faces*, slated for release in January 2012; the great *Mystery at Kirigoshi Estate*, which uses the will of the hall itself as a metaphor; *The Murder Equation* series, that unthinkable thing, a

mystery with mathematics; the *Slaughtering Spirit* series, done up in the splatter horror genre; *A Whisper of Scarlet*, which runs in the same vein as *Another*; and many, many more. Aside from these, two stories included in the short story collection *Dondon Bridge Came Falling Down*—the title story and *Fall of the House of Isono*—are shocking in every meaning of the word. The collection is a must-read. The grit and conviction of Mr. Ayatsuji to give his life for the mystery story, ready to do anything to catch the reader off guard—yes, even that comes across clearly. I recommend it to anyone who dreams of writing a novel themselves. Also worthy of consultation because Mr. Ayatsuji is so gifted at differentiating his characters. They are easy to place as "pieces" constructing not reality, but a mystery. It makes clear what is most important in fiction.

Let's move on to an introduction of the books.

The story turns on the "curse" (though it's nowhere as simplistic as that. We could swap the word out for "irrational phenomenon" or "superstition." But in this analysis, the word "curse" will become necessary at the end, and so I use it here) plaguing third-year Class 3 at Yomiyama North Middle, the protagonist, "Koichi Sakakibara," who transfers into the class, and the mysterious girl in the eye patch, "Mei Misaki." One after another, people with a connection to the class are pulled into misfortune and the characters struggle to resist it.

What leaves the greatest impression in the early stages of the story is, perhaps, Mei Misaki's line when the protagonist first encounters her: "Half my body is waiting there, the poor thing." I read this part in the mind-set of a novelist and thought to myself, "Ah, so this

character is the type that won't act selfishly." Thinking about it more, the same could be said for all of Mr. Ayatsuji's novels. I don't think he ever creates a novel where the characters act selfishly. I believe this is a critical element in creating the optical illusions I discussed earlier. It saves the worlds so meticulously created from destruction. It causes the reader to not empathize overmuch. He draws a clear line. Telling the reader, Please enjoy the show from your seat in the audience. A fitting conclusion is being prepared.

When a murderer has appeared in Mr. Ayatsuji's past work, answers to the questions of why (the "whydunit") and how a murder was committed (the "howdunit") and who the murderer was (the "whodunit") come out in a logical progression (even to the point of using mathematical equations) to reveal the truth, but the trick to this book is different. No murder with a clear motive ever occurs. There are accidents and suicides, but these occur not because of the will of a third party but due to a curse.

Another shares this aspect, in which "people living in a specific range may become targets of an indiscriminate death," with *Slaughtering Spirit.* In that sense, it is possible to identify the book as a work of horror; however, the story also includes an element that resembles the search for the suspect. The origins of the curse become clear in the middle section of the story, but the foreshadowing up until the truth is revealed is intricate, allowing the reader to experience an unabashed sensation of "he got me!" Thus I believe these books must be characterized as "a melding of horror and mystery." Plus, one can even glimpse an aspect of the tale of adolescence in the perverse and inexplicable nature of the curse.

Thus does it become a masterpiece in Mr. Ayatsuji's catalog, serving a wide range of readers. Those who have yet to read it absolutely must, and join us in our Ayatsuji addiction. I apologize, but of course there is no cure.

I've come this far in my analysis before glancing at the clock, and I see it's almost time for me to go to work. I recall now that I have an appointment with an initiative client all morning…These are the troubled thoughts of a part-time novelist. I'll try to ride my momentum to close this out.

At the ceremony for the Seishi Yokomizo Grand Prize for Mystery, sponsored by Kadokawa Shoten, there are times when Mr. Ayatsuji, who has long served on the selection committee, will put a genuine curse on the winner. Speaking very frankly and kindly, the man will throw out both hands and present a message implying, "I hope someday you write at least one story that lets you say, 'This is my definitive mystery.'" Since this occurs in public, in the middle of the reception surrounded by journalists, recipients who are unprepared have hastily thrown their chests out and replied, "I do, too." For the record, I was one of the recipients he laid this curse on.

Even in a novel, I believe that the creation of a classical mystery in particular is an endeavor without end. I write and I write, but it's not quite there. Next time, for sure. The difficulty of giving life to a work that could serve as my introduction is something I became starkly aware of after becoming a professional. His curse is one to keep us from losing our taste for the challenge, even after ten or twenty years. It's a curse I pray is never broken.

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ANOTHER, Volume 2
YUKITO AYATSUJI

Translation: Karen McGillicuddy

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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